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Prof. Dr. Peter Paul Schnierer  
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**"I Will Take Your Answer**  
**One Way or Another"**  
**The Oscar Wilde Trial Transcripts**  
**as Literary Artefacts**

Benjamin Merkler  
Boxberggring 12  
69126 Heidelberg  
06221-7350416  
0179-4788849  
BenjaminM@gmx.de

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## 1 Introduction

Wilde is still the Crown Prince of Bohemia. We stand at a threshold in our lives where we look into our futures and see the permanent attachment of a mask, the final adoption of a set of values and 'core beliefs' which will see us through to the end, and then we turn and look back at the gigantic, Promethean figure of Wilde - whether we picture him, cigarette in hand, at a table in the Café Royal, generous in wit and high on fame, or bowed over a deal table in a prison cell and cramped with dysentery - and ask ourselves if we have the courage to be like him, by which we mean the courage to be like ourselves. (Fry: xxiv)

This description of the impact Wilde still has on many people is perfectly chosen by someone, who - not only since impersonating Wilde - is received by many people as a legitimate 21<sup>st</sup> century heir to Wilde. Even though the latter has put his influence in much stronger words in *De Profundis*:

The gods had given me almost everything. I had genius, a distinguished name, high social position, brilliancy, intellectual daring: I made art a philosophy, and philosophy an art: I altered the minds of men and the colours of things: there was nothing I said or did that did not make people wonder: I took the drama, the most objective form known to art, and made it as personal a mode of expression as the lyric or the sonnet, at the same time that I widened its range and enriched its characterisation: drama, novel, poem in rhyme, poem in prose, subtle or fantastic dialogue, whatever I touched I made beautiful in a new mode of beauty: to truth itself I gave what is false no less than what is true as its rightful province, and showed that the false and the true are merely forms of intellectual existence. I treated Art as the supreme reality, and life as a mere mode of fiction: I awoke the imagination of my century so that it created myth and legend around me: I summed up all systems in a phrase, and all existence in an epigram. (*Letters*: 729)

Oscar Wilde was not only an eccentric artist and perhaps one of the most popular British dramatists since Shakespeare, but also one of the - if not the - first modern star, who understood how to present oneself in public and use publicity as means of self-realisation. He was an idol for generations of extravagant people, exceeding the sphere of homosexuals, for which he became a kind of saint<sup>1</sup> because being homosexual himself.

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<sup>1</sup> "For homosexuals, he became a martyr figure, a haunting symbol of gay vulnerability and gay resistance. Responsible more than anyone else for forming the popular stereotype of the homosexual as a dandiacal wit who flaunts middle-class mores, he is also most responsible for exemplifying the political realities of gay

Especially during the last three to four decades, by the rise of gender and queer theory within literary discourse, the interest in Wilde grew constantly<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, a large interest by a broad public has existed ever since his death and he was taken as a model for literary characters even during his lifetime<sup>3</sup>, the most obvious borrowing being found in Robert Hichens's novel *The Green Carnation*<sup>4</sup>.

Because of this extraordinary significance in the public eye, there is a vast amount of secondary literature on Wilde, his work and his life as well as his surroundings, so that for a *Magisterarbeit* this had to be reduced to a couple of exemplary pieces, even though there are a lot of further feasible works on this theme. Also only a part of the primary literature could be taken into account and the non-dramatic works were chosen, due to their closeness to the thematic field of the trials. Additionally, even though totally matching the topic, *Teleny*<sup>5</sup> will not be discussed because of its unclear origin.

After discussing upcoming theoretical problems of this paper like the reliability of transcripts as well as the theoretical background of the following analysis, there will

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oppression. He is a symbolic figure not only because his imprisonment is the political reality that all subsequent considerations of homosexuality must confront, but also because his defiance and his painfully earned self-realization are important lessons in the struggle for gay liberation." (Summers, 2003: 696)

<sup>2</sup> Even though a very interesting analysis of Wilde and his life is given in Neil Bartlett's *Who was that man?* it will consciously not be taken into account in regard to this paper, because being written from an extremely gay point of view, it does not fit into the conception of this paper.

<sup>3</sup> An extensive analysis can be found in Angela Kingstons book *Oscar Wilde as a Character in Victorian Fiction*.

<sup>4</sup> "The consolidation of a queer identity begins to take shape around Wilde in Robert Hichens's novel, *The Green Carnation* (the flower had been worn by Wilde and his circle). Hichens moved in compatible circles with Douglas and Wilde, whom he met a number of times; his book, published in 1894, is a skit, though not an unfriendly one." (Sinfield: 118)

<sup>5</sup> *Teleny* is a highly pornographic novel – however in a very aesthetical language – about a relationship of the upper-class Camille Des Grieux with the pianist Teleny. Published secretly and of unknown origin, there is much speculation about this novel. This paper will not take it into account, because it cannot unambiguously be connected to Wilde, though there is the assumption that he might have contributed at least parts of it: "Weder ist sicher, wann und wie [der Roman] entstand, noch wann er zum ersten mal im Druck (und in welcher Fassung) erschien, noch wer ihn geschrieben hat oder mit welchen Anteilen welche Autoren an ihm beteiligt sind. [...] Relativ sicher scheint allerdings [...], durch bibliographische und interpretatorische Rückschlüsse, daß Oscar Wilde als Autor in mehr oder weniger engem Bezug zu diesem als 'pornographisch' berüchtigten Roman steht." (Popp: 86)

be an introductory part that first of all provides information on the legal and social situation the Wilde trials are embedded in. Then the different 'aesthetic models' from dandyism to decadence will be explained briefly followed by a closer look on Wilde's self-representation. Afterwards some crucial biographical background information will be given of Wilde, his relationship to Lord Alfred Douglas as well as Douglas's father Lord Queensberry.

The main part of this paper then will focus on the trials<sup>6</sup>, beginning with a summary and going on by discussing selected passages that will be contrasted to the Wildean work. Before then placing the trial transcripts within the context of Wilde's work with the help of Genette's concept of paratexts, there will be a short digression by having a look at Wilde's 'autobiography' *De Profundis*.

The intention of this paper is to depict the relevance of the trials in the context of understanding Wilde's work. Limited in its volume, this paper will obviously fail to give adequate answers to the questions emerging during the analysis. Therefore, its aim will be to establish a foundation for further research by demonstrating how the integration of the trial transcripts into the material observed for interpretation can lead to new insights and enrich the understanding of Wilde's Œuvre.

### **1.1 Problems of Transcription**

Being one of the main sources of this paper, transcripts have to be discussed regarding their reliability. What can they record and - almost more important - what can they not?

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<sup>6</sup> Because Queensberry had left a card at the Albemarle Club, where Wilde was a member, accusing on it Wilde to be a sodomite, Wilde sued him for libelling. After this first trial, two further trials against Wilde followed charging him with homosexuality and ending in a verdict of two years imprisonment with hard labour.

To what extent do they represent 'truth'? Ideally a transcript is:

[...] the verbatim record of a present soon to become past, a mirror/a record/a voice machine in which the "author" exercises no authorial presence. The author of the trial transcript is, indeed, the ghost in the machine. (Sarat: 356)

But in reality transcripts are limited:

[They] do not, and cannot, communicate the manner in which words were spoken or the way in which evidence was presented during trial. [...] Despite their absence from the trial record, the influence of these and other details have on individual jurors and the jury as a whole can be tremendous. (Wicht as quoted in Sarat: 356)

Moreover, they are subject to selection and thereby "are the very stuff of politics; in and through our political processes we decide who or what should be remembered or memorialized and in what ways." (Sarat: 363) In this regard the integrity of transcripts cannot be proved and may not be given. In respect of this selection, one has to say that transcripts could - but do not have to - be unreliable. But although something is missing, the existing material can be analysed.

What about this existing material then? Is it an adequate record of what happened? As Wicht mentioned the non-textual elements are missing and factors like for example intonation, gesture and mimic normally are not recorded. This being a problem of texts in general - one never knows how a written sentence was imagined by its author - it should not lead to trouble.

What about the accuracy of reproduction of spoken words? This is a still larger problem and as this paper wants to place the transcripts - especially the words spoken by Wilde in front of court - in the context of his work, one should always bear in mind that, strictly speaking, transcripts are only retellings by a second voice from a kind of narrative level. Perhaps another question can solve this problem. The accuracy notwithstanding, the question is, if it is of special

importance to the following analysis. Is there something like an importance of being accurate in the sense of a one-to-one translation from the spoken utterances to the written document?

This question can be divided by consideration of two different aspects: on the one hand substantially regarding the content, on the other hand formally regarding word choice and style. The first aspect should not be too problematic as it is a problem that occurs in many other contexts as well. To name just a few examples, one could say that the situation is similar to Plato's description of Socrates' dialogues not to mention the esoteric work of Aristotle and even of the dramatic texts of Shakespeare there are differing formulations in the different quartos and folios. Another point is that even within the trial itself an utterance often is repeated and a special statement is reformulated and paraphrased. So unless there has been no manipulation by the person writing the transcript, it is of minor importance if the written is accurate regarding every single word. The underlying mental representation of a statement, what could be compared to the Saussurean *signifié*, presumably stays untouched and is depicted correctly in spite of slight differences in formulation.

Regarding the second aspect, accuracy is of great importance, because if one wants to analyse the style of speech within a transcript, every single word has fundamental influence. Additionally, there are the gaps already mentioned, like intonation, gesture and mimic, that also play an important role with regard to stylistic means. So the analysis of performance cannot be based on the transcript alone; here supplemental material is needed which can be found in secondary sources like descriptions and evaluations of eye-witnesses. This directly leads to the theoretic approach

underlying this paper, because there is an accumulation of different texts that will be factored into the analysis.

## 1.2 New Historicism and Paratexts

In order to place the trial transcripts within the work of Oscar Wilde, this paper will follow the approach of New Historicism. It shall be the underlying paradigm of analysis. Therefore it has to be introduced and explained in which way this approach can be fruitful. Nünning, in *Metzler Lexikon Literatur- und Kulturtheorie*, gives the following definition:

Es ist weniger eine homogene Schule, sondern bezeichnet als Sammelbegriff vielmehr eine breite Palette kontextorientierter neohistorischer Ansätze. (Nünning: 475)

On reading the introduction to *Practicing New Historicism*, that could be understood as an introductory guidebook for this approach and is written by two of its main representatives, one gets a similar impression: New Historicism is less a 'theory' than a 'practical approach' that is shaped by influences of manifold disciplines and ideological ranges of thought. Here Gallagher and Greenblatt describe the difficulties this new approach had by formulating a theoretical concept and it becomes evident that it is more a kind of manner to deal with culture and cultural products:

Where traditional "close readings" tended to build toward an intensified sense of wondering admiration, linked to the celebration of genius, new historicist readings are more often sceptical, wary, demystifying, critical, and even adversarial. (Gallagher/Greenblatt: 9)

It seems that everything can be taken into account as soon as it relevantly adds to interpretation regardless of its origin - be it another discipline, another medium or another theory. Nevertheless it is not just loosely connected material, but an arranged context serving an object of analysis in the centre:



[N]ew historicism becomes a history of possibilities: while deeply interested in the collective, it remains committed to the value of the single voice, the isolated scandal, the idiosyncratic vision, the transient sketch. From the beginning we thought it was crucially important to have it both ways: we wanted to delve as deeply as possible into the creative matrices of particular historical cultures and at the same time we wanted to understand how certain products of these cultures could seem to possess a certain independence. (Gallagher/Greenblatt: 16)

Centrally this paper deals with the Œuvre of Oscar Wilde, or better exemplary parts of it, as well as the trial transcripts that shall serve as literary artefacts that can be taken into account as cultural documents adding up to new questions for future research.

One way of doing so, especially concerning the statements within the trials made by Wilde himself, will be by connecting the material to Genette's concept of paratexts. As this paper will come to the conclusion that the trial transcripts have to be understood as paratextual elements to Wildean literature, this concept has to be defined. Due to the paradigm of New Historicism, which has a wider range than only the 'textual' elements provided by Wilde or with Wilde's authority, the paper will slightly exceed - if extension is possible concerning a field with permeable borders at all - the definition of Genette:

Der Paratext ist also jenes Beiwerk, durch das ein Text zum Buch wird und als solches vor die Leser und, allgemeiner, vor die Öffentlichkeit tritt. Dabei handelt es sich weniger um eine Schranke oder eine undurchlässige Grenze als um eine Schwelle [...]; um eine »unbestimmte Zone« zwischen innen und außen, die selbst wieder keine feste Grenze nach innen (zum Text) und nach außen (dem Diskurs der Welt über den Text) aufweist; oder wie Philippe Lejeune gesagt hat, um »Anhängsel des gedruckten Textes, die in Wirklichkeit jede Lektüre steuern.« (Genette: 10)

But it will stick to one of the most central conditions of Genette's concept:

[G]rundlegend ist aber [...] die Existenz eines impliziten Kontextes im Umfeld des Werkes, der dessen Bedeutung präzisiert oder mehr oder weniger modifiziert. (Genette:15)

Although, strictly speaking, only a part of the paratext will be focused, namely the epitext:

Der Epitext unterscheidet sich vom Peritext - das heißt unseren Abmachungen zufolge vom gesamten übrigen Paratext - durch ein im Prinzip rein räumliches Kriterium. Ein Epitext ist jedes paratextuelle Element, das nicht materiell in ein und demselben Band als Anhang zum Text steht, sondern gewissermaßen im freien Raum zirkuliert, in einem virtuell unbegrenzten physikalischen oder sozialen Raum. Der Ort des Epitextes ist also *anywhere out of the book*. (Genette: 328)

Regarding a central, structural element of Genette's paratext, which he calls the functional character of paratexts, this applies perfectly to the idea being associated with New Historicism - both are auxiliary measures to enrich interpretation:

Diese Bemerkungen [...] haben uns also unmerklich zum Wesentlichen geführt, zum *funktionalen* Charakter des Paratextes. Wesentlich, weil der Paratext offenkundig - von punktuellen Ausnahmen abgesehen, die wir da und dort antreffen - in allen seinen Formen ein zutiefst heteronomer Hilfsdiskurs ist, der im Dienst einer anderen Sache steht, die seine Daseinsberechtigung bildet, nämlich des Textes. (Genette: 18)

Having defined a theoretical foundation for further analysis, the backgrounds of the Wildean trials have to be given. Thus not only will crucial information be provided, but even more importantly, the setting is described in which Wilde's work as well as the trials occurred.

## **2 The Background of the Oscar Wilde Trials**

Before focusing on the Oscar Wilde trials in detail, some preliminary information has to be provided for a better understanding of the situation as a whole. Being the first prominent case that confronted the public with the legal revision ten years before in 1885, the history of law concerning homosexuality has to be kept in mind. This is closely connected to the public attitude towards same-sex relationships and questions of Victorian morality. Moreover the concepts of Aestheticism and Dandyism shall be discussed as they play a major role in understanding the trials within the chosen approaches of interpretation. This directly leads

to an analysis of Oscar Wilde's person in regard to his understanding of life as art and the way he appeared in public, followed by a brief summary of his relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas and Lord Queensberry's reaction to it.

## 2.1 The Legal Sphere - Homosexuality<sup>7</sup> and Law

Any male person who, in public or private, commits, or is a party to the commission of, or procures or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of, any act of gross indecency with another male person, shall be guilty of a misdemeanour, and being convicted thereof shall be liable at the discretion of the court to be imprisoned for any term not exceeding two years, with or without hard labour. (11<sup>th</sup> clause of the Criminal Law Amendments Act (48 & 49 Vic. cap. 69) as quoted in Smith: 537)

These words would become fatal for Oscar Wilde and lead to his two year imprisonment in Reading Gaol accompanied by hard labour - the maximum penalty under this law. They were written by Henry Labouchere (1831-1912), "a witty, worldly-wise Radical and a knowing journalist" (Smith: 537) and became law on January, 1<sup>st</sup> 1886.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century the legal situation had changed several times. "In early nineteenth-century England, more men were hanged for sodomy than in any other period, apparently. [...] But after 1830 the hangings ceased, and in 1861 the death penalty was repealed." (Dynes: 357) From then "[u]nder the [...] Offences against the Person Act of 1861 (24 & 25 Victoria cap. 100) only buggery = anal intercourse was

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<sup>7</sup> The term homosexuality is used in this paper according to readability and comprehension of the contemporary reader, even though, being understood differently in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is not quite correct. Within the legal sphere different terms were used to refer to same-sex intercourse throughout the century, of which a small overview shall be given here: 'Sodomy' refers to any crime against nature, including fellation, anal penetration (heterosexual and homosexual alike), homosexuality and bestiality. Thus the meaning exceeded the later terms '(sexual) inversion' and 'homosexuality' (cf. Dynes: 1231), which were introduced within the beginning discourse of same-sex desire in German psychiatry in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. (cf. Dynes: 555) Although the term 'buggery' had a comparable meaning to 'sodomy', it tends to refer only to anal penetration and was only used in legal circumstances. (cf. Dynes: 172) Under 'gross indecency' any homosexual contact was subsumed and the term was first used within English law by the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885. (cf. Dynes: 507) Supported by the non-existence of 'petty indecency', the term 'indecency' had "a broad connotation, suggesting anything held to be unseemly, offensive, or obscene." (Dynes: 507)

punishable in English law" (Dynes: 282) and "required proof of penetration (down to 1828 the law was interpreted to require penetration and emission)." (Dynes: 507) Thus, one could speak of a tentative decriminalisation up to then, but then "the 1885 legislation enlarged the prohibition to include any homosexual contact whatsoever." (Dynes: 507)

The origin of the quoted amendment is interesting because apparently it "was unrelated to the theme of the measure, which was entitled 'An Act to make further provision for the Protection of Women and Girls<sup>8</sup>, the suppression of brothels, and other purposes'." (Smith: 537) "The impetus for [it] was the moral panic in reaction to the revelation that there were English girls being held captive in Brussels' brothels and that 'white slavery' in the form of juvenile prostitution was widespread in England." (Böker: 47, fn 31)

Passing Parliament "at a time of sensational journalistic exposés of sexual abuse and a time of serious efforts at social reform" (Farrell: 63), it was discussed only superficially and "[i]n calmer times the amendment would probably been ruled out of order." (Smith: 537) The problematic aspect of Labouchere's draft of the amendment, only changed in regard to the maximum penalty of two years instead of one<sup>9</sup>, was that it also criminalised private incidents of 'gross indecency':

It is doubtful whether the House fully appreciated that the words "in public or private" in the new clause had completely altered the law; but, as soon as the Royal Assent had been given and the Act was published, there began a spate of correspondence in the newspapers, both legal and lay, and references to the various public platforms, which were duly reported. (Humphreys: 6)

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<sup>8</sup> The fact that Lesbianism had not been included and subsequently as well as in other parts of the world – it is common practice to 'copy' laws and being one of the first laws on homosexuality, this amendment was transferred into law in other nations – never has been illegal goes back to an amusing anecdote: "When it was pointed out to Queen Victoria that women were not mentioned, she is reported to have said, 'No woman would do that.'" (Ellmann: 386)

<sup>9</sup> As Smith shows in his essay, Labouchere later claimed that his draft would have provided seven years, but the draft that moved into Parliament only provided one year. (cf. Smith: 543) Referring to the sentence in the Oscar Wilde trial, Labouchere later commented: "Hence the insufficiency of the severest sentence that the law allows which, as Mr Justice Wills observed, is totally inadequate to the offence." (quoted in Smith: 539)

Moreover in the context of moral panic, the amendment "with its weak provisions about evidence, and exposure of 'consent' and 'procuring' to expansive judicial interpretation, became a terrible instrument." (Smith: 537) Perhaps Farrell is right, when he states that this "legislation was meant to allay public anxiety, yet in mapping an underworld of criminal horrors, the laws inevitably focused public attention on - and gave official weight to - the vices it sought to crush." (Farrell: 63-64)

In the foreword to Hyde's edition of the Wilde trials, Travers Humphreys, during the trials junior to Wilde's solicitor Edward Clarke, points to an important consideration:

In every sensational trial by jury one of the factors to be reckoned with is the atmosphere in which the case is tried, by which I mean the attitude of the public, from which are drawn the jurors, to the particular subject debated, and the likelihood of prejudice for or against one of the parties. (Humphreys: 5)

And he later tells that during the trials "there was a belief in some minds [...] that [the amendment's] unpopularity would assist Wilde. As it was put by a legal friend of [him]: 'We shall see which the jury dislike most - section 11 or Oscar Wilde.'" (Humphreys: 7)

## **2.2 The Public Sphere - Homosexuality and Society**

"Throughout the century a thriving underground of male prostitution can be documented in London." (Dynes: 357) Most of the male prostitutes came from the lower classes and sold their bodies for money. Thus the situation got worse, when the amendment was made: "The law, dubbed the 'blackmailer's charter,' cast the shadow of criminality over British homosexual life until its repeal in 1967 - 82 years after its enactment." (Dynes: 283)

Additional to homosexuality as such came the fact that, especially in cases of prostitution, class boundaries were disregarded:

Wildes Verbrechen bestand nicht darin, daß er homosexuell war und seine Homosexualität lebte. Es bestand darin, daß er dies nicht in der gesellschaftlich gebotenen Diskretion tat, sondern öffentlich und unter Mißachtung der Standes- und Klassenschränken nach oben und nach unten. (Popp: 85-86)

Some years earlier another scandal arose called the Cleveland Street Scandal; it also drew attention because class boundaries were overstepped:

Homosexuals of the upper social strata rubbed shoulders with hustlers from the depth of the criminal underworld, a phenomenon so aberrant from the standpoint of a class society that as late as the middle of the twentieth century the police could be moved to an investigation merely by evidence of associations of this kind. In 1889 a scandal occurred in which a house in Cleveland Street was discovered to be a place of assignation for homosexual clients and telegraph boys who served them as prostitutes. (Dynes: 742)

Sexual scandals in general were taken up by the press with the greatest pleasure and they reported extensively about them. To this Wilde complained in *The Soul of Man under Socialism*:

The harm is done by the serious, thoughtful, earnest journalists, who solemnly, as they are doing at present, will drag before the eyes of the public some incident in the private life of a great statesman, of a man who is a leader of political thought as he is a creator of political force, and invite the public to discuss the incident, to exercise authority in the matter, to give their views, and not merely to give their views, but to carry them into action, to dictate to the man upon all other points, to dictate to his party, to dictate to his country; in fact, to make themselves ridiculous, offensive, and harmful. The private lives of men and women should not be told to the public. The public have nothing to do with them at all. (SoMuS: 41)

That he himself would fall victim to such proceedings, Wilde did not know at the time he wrote these lines. His case even exceeded the field of sexuality:

During the three trials, which terminated with Wilde's and Alfred Taylor's sentencing, with the exception of one daily and one weekly journal (the *Daily Chronicle* and *Reynold's Newspaper*), the London press was uniformly hostile to Wilde; and frequently its hostility was directed toward art, education and "idleness" as well as toward homosexuality. (Gagnier, 1991: 28)

Regarding homosexuality, Cohen gives in his analysis of homoerotic desire the explanation that it was perceived as a kind of degeneration:

[T]he public response must be considered in the light of the Victorian bourgeoisie's larger efforts to legitimate certain limits for the sexual deployment of the male body and, in Foucault's terms, to define a "class body." The middle-aged, middle-class men who judged Wilde - both in the court and in the press - saw themselves as attempting not merely to control a "degenerate" form of male sexuality but also to ensure standards for the health of their children and their country. (Cohen: 69)

The question that comes to mind is how such a view could have existed:

What held those "wholesome, manly, simple ideals of English life" in place were traditional and conservative ideas of what constituted human nature and human subjectivity; and it was these that Wilde attacked: not so much conventional morality itself as the ideological anchor points for that morality. (Dollimore: 60)

Especially when arguing with the help of such concepts of manliness as a basis for public morality, one has to keep in mind that the opposite, namely effeminacy, even though it was also regarded as conflicting these concepts, not necessarily had to be connected with a reception of homosexuality:

Our interpretation is retroactive; in fact Wilde and his writings look queer because our stereotypical notion of male homosexuality derives from Wilde, and our ideas about him. [...] Wilde was perceived as effeminate, to be sure; but not, thereby, as queer. In the mid twentieth century, effeminacy and queerness became virtually synonymous, along with the rest of the Wildean manner. (Sinfield: vii)

Concerning his art, Waldrep points out that Wilde's unconventional attitude was motivated by his own situation: "Much of what we assume to be Wilde's ploy for idleness and the upending of Victorian bourgeois platitudes can also be seen as an attempt to break from the bonds that held him." (Waldrep: XVII) However, Wilde claimed to be not interested in the reaction he provoked: "A true artist takes no notice whatever of the public. The public are to him non-existent." (SoMuS: 45)

### 2.3 Dandyism, Aestheticism and Decadence

When speaking of the *fin-de-siècle* one tends to use the terms Dandyism, Aestheticism and Decadence interchangeably due to their close relation to each other. Anyhow a closer look at the core of each term is helpful to understand late 19<sup>th</sup> century's culture, even though it cannot prevent amalgamation in several contexts.

Dandyism is not really a concept or movement, but more a kind of lifestyle - especially concerning fashion - that indirectly states the supremacy of elegance and beauty. "During the first quarter of the nineteenth century dandyism was a characteristically English phenomenon." (Dynes: 293) Wilde often is referred to as a dandy in the context of his lecture tour through the United States in 1882 due to his style of clothing. (cf. Dynes: 293) Furthermore he is described as having had a lifestyle following this kind of identity:

Originally a paragon of leisure-class ostentation, the dandy toward the end of the nineteenth century took on a new social identity as a type of the aesthete, of the bearer of a culture that flaunted its scorn for the humdrum way of life of the staid middle class. [...] The dandy exemplifies the symbolic value of clothing in European civilization, the use of costume for self-definition and self-affirmation, and also an expression of the aesthetic in private life, where clothes merge with the personality of the wearer and confirm his status in the eyes of others. (Dynes: 294)

As can be seen in this definition, Dandyism is closely connected to aestheticism - the difference is that the latter, besides only being focussed on lifestyle, is a devised concept and a movement in literature and art:

At once a theory of art and an approach to living, aestheticism emphasizes the absolute autonomy of works of art, their total pre-eminence over other aspects of life, and their independence of moral and social conditions. The aesthetic movement took on extraordinary force at the end of the nineteenth century, primarily in France and England. (Summers, 2002: 1)

Walter Pater can be seen as the leading figure of the upcoming aestheticism in England and his *Studies in the History of the*



*Renaissance*, published in 1873 was a kind of 'bible' to the aesthetes. (cf. Dynes: 17) Wilde was familiar with his texts and met him personally in his third year at Oxford. (cf. Ellmann: 46) One could say that Wilde, who on leaving Oxford in 1879 designated himself as 'professor of aesthetics', (cf. Waldrep: XI) completed what Pater had begun:

Although Wilde downplayed Pater's influence on his work, Pater, Gautier, and Huysmans were of collective importance in helping determine Wilde's special brand of aestheticism. Although Wilde is generally considered to be the *fin-de-siècle* aesthete *par excellence*, looked at as a whole his writings on aestheticism reveal a far more complex and even critical attitude toward a life devoted to artistic sensation. (Summers, 2002: 3)

As is the case with the boundary between dandyism and aestheticism, the borderline between the latter and decadence cannot be drawn clearly, either:

[N]ot all Decadent literature is part of Aestheticism, just as not all Aesthetic literature can be called Decadent. Generally speaking, aestheticism applies to the concept of *l'art pour l'art* (art for art's sake) to art, whereas Decadence applies it to life and society, though Decadence also has other crucial defining characteristics, such as its interest in mind-altering drugs, the imagination, and physical and mental degeneration and alteration. [...] Decadent literature is writing that either describes aspects of a decadent lifestyle or reflects Decadence through the deformation and refinement of style, form, syntax, and language. (Summers, 2002: 178)

Even in their origins there is a similarity, which urges the suggestion that the one is a compulsory descendant of the other:

It was in France, however, that the theory of decadence emerged most fully and influentially. [...] England, much influenced by nineteenth century French cultural exports, had her own decadent writers and poets. The disgrace of [...] Oscar Wilde, in the three trials of 1895, which had repercussion throughout Europe, served for many to link the literary concept of decadence with the image of a perverted lifestyle. (Dynes: 301)

Not only a homosexual, perverted understanding but also the demise of this movement is closely related to the public scandal produced by Wilde:

The Decadent Movement in England ended almost overnight, with the Wilde trials in 1895. [...] Symbolism, while echoing Decadence both in style and in its association of art with the realm of the mind and the imagination, minimized the seemingly perverse and immoral characteristics of the earlier movement. (Summers, 2002: 180)

Waldrep and others point out that Wilde lived according to each of these concepts one after another:

A primary precursor for Wilde, therefore, may have been a particular strain of German romanticism that he was to embrace via the formulation of the dandy [...] which Wilde was ultimately to transform, first into "aestheticism" and later, with the help of the French, into "decadence". (Waldrep: XIV)

Seen in retrospect, this is a satirical parallel to Dorian Gray, whose picture representing an idealised self consequently had to be destroyed after transforming from aestheticism to decadence - thus, metaphorically, in *Dorian Gray* Wilde unconsciously foretold his own fate as well as that of the development of these concepts.

## **2.4 Oscar Wilde Performing Oscar Wilde**

"To pose as Oscar Wilde, [...] a man perceived by many (myself often included) to be posing as one who posed at being a poseur - how many Chinese boxes in a hall of how many mirrors does that make?" (Fry: vii) This statement is made by Stephen Fry, who impersonated Oscar Wilde in the movie 'Wilde'. What it shows, is that Wilde had a kind of constructed self, which he presented to the public. He was famous for being himself and in many sources is seen as the first media icon<sup>10</sup> anticipating a tradition that rose during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and comes down to current icons like Madonna or others: "[U]p until his trial, in 1893 [sic], the public view of Wilde was that the most famous thing about him was his fame - a logic loop all too familiar to contemporary celebrities." (Fry: xii)

His most famous period was just before his trials; *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* had their

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<sup>10</sup> In his book *The Aesthetics of Self-Invention*, where Waldrep shows up the link of self-invented public personae from Wilde to David Bowie, he argues that: "Wilde's concept of his own creation as a type [...] could only have the influence it did through the various forms of rapid reproduction of the time such as photography, journalism, and publishing." (Waldrep: 70)

premieres in 1895 and were much celebrated and even the preceding two years are called "the very zenith of success" by Frank Harris: "[H]is personal popularity [...] was extraordinary; thousands admired him, many liked him; he seemed to have everything that heart could desire and perfect health to boot." (Harris: 175) That there was also another side of the coin, Shaw observes when commenting in his memories on Harris's praise: "Wilde was so in love with style that he never realized the danger of biting off more than he could chew: in other words, of putting up more style than his matter would carry." (Shaw: 23) Even though this, in his view, also explains his icon status: "Wilde was a conventional man: his unconventionality was the very pedantry of convention: never was there a man less an outlaw than he." (Shaw: 28)

As Waldrep points out this unconventionality was achieved by a strong emphasis on the individual. "That is, Wilde saw what he called 'individualism' as the greatest good within society because it is a 'disintegrating force' that breaks up 'monotony of type' and frees individuals to develop their full potential. In "The Soul of Man under Socialism" Wilde condenses this to a short formula: "'Know thyself!' was written over the portal of the antique world. Over the portal of the new world 'Be thyself' shall be written." (SoMuS: 27)

Besides his clothing, gesturing and pronunciation, Wilde's conversational skills were crucial to set up his idealised identity. (cf. Waldrep: 66) Even André Gide, friend to Wilde and himself a man of *belles lettres*, was smitten with his parlance at their first encounter:

I heard him spoken of at the home of Mallarmé: he was portrayed as a brilliant talker, and I wished to know him, though I had no hope of managing to do so. A happy chance, or rather a friend, to whom I had told my desire, served me. Wilde was invited to dinner. It was at the restaurant. There were four of us, but Wilde was the only one who talked.

Wilde did not converse: he narrated. Throughout almost the whole of the meal, he did not stop narrating. He narrated gently, slowly; his very voice was wonderful. (Gide quoted in Mikhail: 290)

Actually, conversations with Wilde were so impressive on the participants that Laurence Housman published a description of an encounter with Wilde in his book *Echo de Paris*. As Housman wrote it many years after Wilde's death out of memory, there are doubts concerning the reliability of the reproduced language, but in his foreword an extensive description of Wilde's manner of speaking can be found<sup>11</sup>:

Der Glanz seiner Sprache kann nur in zweifelhaftem Grade durch das kalte Mittel des Buchdrucks wiedergegeben werden, und es mag sein, daß es mir gänzlich mißlungen ist, die eigenartige und bezwingende Art dessen, was mündlich so wohl klang, wiederzugeben. Aber der Eindruck, den ich bei dieser Gelegenheit erhielt, war, daß Oscar Wilde der unvergleichbar begabteste Redner war, dem ich jemals begegnet bin. Die fließende Sprache, lässig und selbstherrlich, im Ton orakelhaft, im Stoff spielerisch launenhaft, die ohne Pause, ohne Zögern, ohne Veränderung eines einzelnen Wortes dahinglitt, mit der ruhigen Beflissenheit eines Mannes, der in diesem Fach Meister war und der sich bewußt war, daß er wenigstens in jenem Augenblicke wieder in seiner alten Stärke dastand. (Housman: 25)

As will be seen later, this ability to impress others by mere language was crucially important while being in court. But before concentrating on the trials in detail, the background has to be given, how it came that this immortal 'Promethean figure', as Stephen Fry calls him, could be tied to a rock in isolation by Queensberry until he was rescued by a 'Herculean' occurrence like Modernism.

## **2.5 The Relationship of Oscar Wilde and Bosie Douglas**

On May 29<sup>th</sup> 1884, Oscar Wilde married Constance Lloyd. Back then he lead a perfectly proper and 'normal' life. About a year later, on June 5<sup>th</sup> 1885, their first son Cyril was born, followed by their second son Vyvyan another year later on November 5<sup>th</sup> 1886. But in the meantime Wilde's life as well as his attitude toward this marriage had changed (cf. Ellmann: 234, 250-251). According to Harris, Wilde himself later said:

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<sup>11</sup> The encounter took place after Wilde's release from prison and according to other sources at this time Wilde had changed a lot and was no longer 'at his best'.

When I married, my wife was a beautiful girl, white and slim as a lily, with dancing eyes and gay rippling laughter like music. In a year or so the flowerlike grace had all vanished; she became heavy, shapeless, deformed. [...] I tried to be kind to her; forced myself to touch and kiss her. (Harris quoted in Ellmann: 250)

This was the time at which Wilde strode a new path that would distance him more and more from his family<sup>12</sup>, until after the trials and Constance's death on April 7<sup>th</sup> 1898, he totally lost the connection to his children<sup>13</sup>.

During this period Wilde intensified his relationship with Robert Ross, whom he first met in 1886 at Oxford and who would become his presumably closest relation and after his death his literary executor. In the autumn of 1886 when Ross was seventeen and during Constance's second pregnancy, he seduced Wilde. (cf. Ellmann: 259, 261, 553) "Both Ross and Wilde told friends that their homosexual encounter had been Wilde's first." (Ellmann: 261)

Ross is supposed to be the only homosexual relation of Wilde until 1889, when Wilde met John Gray, a carpenter's son after which Wilde named his most famous character. (cf. Ellmann: 290) "Wilde and Gray were assumed to be lovers, and there seems no reason to doubt it<sup>14</sup>." (Ellmann: 291)

After the publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in 1891, Oscar Wilde first came across Lord Alfred 'Bosie' Douglas, the youngest son of John Sholto Douglas, ninth

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<sup>12</sup> A later episode, when he already lived together with Bosie at the Savoy Hotel, very movingly illustrates the disturbed family situation: "Constance arrived, because she saw so little of her husband, to bring him his post. When she besought him to come home, he pretended he had been away so long he had forgotten the number of his house, and Constance smiled through her tears. [...] [On another occasion h]e related to Mme Melba how he had been telling his sons stories the night before about little boys who were naughty and made their mother cry, and what dreadful things would happen to them unless they became better. 'Do you know what one of them answered? He asked me what punishment would be reserved for naughty papas, who did not come home till the early morning, and made mother cry far more.' The punishment for that would be severe indeed." (Ellmann: 371)

<sup>13</sup> Even though Constance had withdrawn from divorce proceedings in 1895, she changed her family name and that of her children into 'Holland'. After her death it was decided that Wilde should not be allowed to see his children again. (cf. Ellmann: 462, 532)

<sup>14</sup> They did not break their relationship until 1883, although Gray in 1892, after having thought to commit suicide because of his appearing rival Lord Alfred, fell in love with a certain André Raffalovich. (cf. Ellmann: 369-370)

Marquess of Queensberry, at a meeting at Wilde's home in Tite Street to which Douglas accompanied his elder cousin Lionel Johnson, who knew Wilde and had given a copy of *Dorian Gray* to Douglas, with which the latter was quite taken having read it several times. (cf. Ellmann: 306) This first encounter was not followed by further contact until spring 1892, when Douglas came to seek help from Wilde in a case of blackmail. Wilde consulted his counsel George Lewis and the problem was solved by paying one hundred pounds to the blackmailer. From this time onwards the contact between Wilde and Douglas constantly developed. (cf. Ellmann: 362-363) They spent the summer together with each other and Douglas sent Wilde his poems:

[T]he first dated November 1892, a month when Wilde first experienced the effects of Bosie's extravagance. It is likely that in this month they became firmly committed to each other. The first poem Douglas sent was entitled 'De Profundis,' a proleptic irony: its tenor is that he has a love but cannot say, because of its nature, who his love is. (Ellmann: 363)

Their relationship was an idealised, romantic one and presumably was unconsummated from the beginning. Douglas was obsessed by young men, who sold their love for a lunch or a hand of pounds. (cf. Ellmann: 366) He introduced Wilde into this decadent sexuality within the underworld and "there was a kind of competition between them." (Ellmann: 366) Douglas constantly brought new acquaintances, amongst them Maurice Schwabe, who introduced Wilde to Alfred Taylor, who later would be accused together with Wilde. (cf. Ellmann: 366)

Taylor then procured for Wilde a couple of young men: "Wilde lavished money and cigarette cases and other gifts upon these boys, and cultivated a reputation for generosity and goodwill of which they took shameless advantage." (Ellmann: 367) Wilde began staying in hotels instead of at his home and it seems that "the excitement of doing something considered wrong, and the professional avarice of the blackmailing,

extortionate, faithless boys may have been as important for Wilde as sexual gratification." (Ellmann: 368)

Ellmann opens up his chapter about this time with the words: "Wilde wanted a consuming passion; he got it and was consumed by it." (Ellmann: 362) And this is not only true for the captivating underworld activities, but also for the relationship between Wilde and Douglas. There was a constant tension of harmony and annoyances:

It was not Douglas's nature to stay calm for long, and after a few days he flared up. His vituperation in these moods was more than Wilde could bear, and when Douglas went off in a tantrum to Bristol the next morning, Wilde welcomed the idea that their friendship might be at an end. [...] But by the time he reached Bristol Douglas thought better of his outburst, and begged forgiveness. Wilde gave in, and Douglas returned to go back to London. (Ellmann: 373)

Similar scenes repeatedly occurred and their relationship was turned on and off alternately. Wilde always believing that he would put an end to their connection, after a short time gave in and met Douglas again. Bosie on his side in most cases did not need long to realise that he was financially and emotionally dependent on Wilde, even though his unsteady character often led them into serious conflicts.

## **2.6 Loved Friend, Unloved Son - Lord Alfred Douglas**

Wilde came to realize that Douglas was not only beautiful but reckless and unmanageable. His temper was ferocious. [...] He wanted to be loved, and he wanted to be treated as an intellectual equal. One way of confirming his power over his friend was by financial dependence. He had no need to importune Wilde, who was as excessive in generosity as in everything else, and it would have taken considerable restraint not to spend Wilde's money as freely as his own. [...] Since neither Wilde nor Douglas practiced or expected sexual fidelity, money was the stamp and seal of their love. (Ellmann: 364-365)

Because of his disturbed relationship with his father, Douglas was not only in need of a 'father-figure' which he found in Wilde but also, as mentioned, he relied on financial support granted by Wilde.

At the beginning of their relationship, he was studying at Magdalen College in Oxford, where Wilde had been. But when it came to his Greats examinations in June 1893, Douglas did not show up and instead "remove[d] his name from the college books, and wrote indignantly to the President that some day this would be the greatest disgrace for Magdalen." (Ellmann: 377) He preferred to stay a permanent undergraduate. Even before he was mainly interested in leisure activities and for example published the homoerotic undergraduate magazine *Spirit Lamp*. (cf. Ellmann: 36, 306, 371, 377)

Douglas loved his decadent lifestyle and while living it was often very careless. Through him, Alfred Wood came into possession of letters written to Bosie by Wilde, on which Wood blackmailed them and which would play a role in the trials later. (cf. Ellmann: 367) Also he regularly drove Wilde and his surroundings into trouble as an episode shows that took place in 1893<sup>15</sup>:

Reverend Biscalle Hale Wortham[,] kept a boys' school, St Laurence, in Bruges. Robert Ross went to visit the Worthams during the holidays. A sixteen-year-old boy named Phillip Danney, son of an army colonel, was staying there, and Ross, who had known the boy since he was fourteen, invited him to visit him in London. While Danney was staying with him, Ross mentioned the fact casually in a letter to Douglas, then at Goring with Wilde. Douglas responded by rushing to London and bringing the boy back to Goring. 'On Saturday,' says Browning, 'the boy slept with Douglas, on Sunday he slept with Oscar. On Monday he returned to London and slept with a woman at Douglas's expense. On Tuesday he returned to Bruges three days late. His master inquired him into the facts and told them to me as I have related them.' (Ellmann: 383)

The whole affaire was discovered and Colonel Danney intended to prosecute the offenders, but as his lawyer pointed out to him, that even though they could be expected to be imprisoned for two years, his son could expect six months for himself; he did not take further measures in this case. But Ross's family heard about this almost-scandal and urged him to leave the country for a year. (cf. Ellmann: 383) After this, as Ellmann

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<sup>15</sup> It has to be kept in mind that nowadays a distinction is made between homosexuality and paedophilia: Because both were subsumed under sodomy in Wilde's age, this distinction is not made in this paper.



describes, his "life could never be so free and easy again. The tiger had flexed its paws; Wilde would not be warned." (Ellmann: 383)

Douglas's boldness was even worse when he tried to recapture Wilde after one of the many breakups at the end of 1893. This time, for once, Wilde strong-mindedly resisted Douglas's infinite efforts to revive contact by not answering his letters. Douglas answered with "desperate stratagems. He used his wiles to cajole his mother herself, unwilling as she was, to urge Wilde to write to him." (Ellmann: 392) Still getting no reaction from Wilde, who wondered about this interference, he went to the limit:

In any case, Douglas played his last card, an unexpected trump, by writing to ask Constance Wilde [sic] to intercede for him. (It was the same procedure he had used in soliciting the help of Robert Ross to make peace between him and Wilde over the translation of *Salome*.) Though Mrs Wilde was like Ross a rival for Wilde's affections, she also could not resist Bosie's appeal. (Ellmann: 393)

It can be seen that Douglas was the least conducive partner for Wilde one can imagine, especially in contrast to John Gray or Robert Ross, and Ellmann depicts it quite aptly when he writes:

Douglas liked to live on a knife edge, and to have company there. He challenged Wilde into expenditures hitherto undreamed of, in a half-conscious effort to bog his friend down in debt-ridden emotions and emotion-ridden debts. (Ellmann: 387)

## **2.7 Beyond Boxing Rules - Lord Queensberry**

In his obstinate behaviour Bosie had much in common with his father. Lord Queensberry when he was twenty-four had introduced a set of boxing rules that were afterwards used in England and America and was responsible for the introduction of different weight classes in boxing. But besides being a good boxer, he also was a good hunter and even a lay poet. Mostly, however, he was known as a barrater who seized every opportunity to make difficulties. It was no secret in London

that "he was a simple brute. In fact he was a complex one."  
(Ellmann: 365)

Fulminating against Christianity and fancying himself as an aristocratic rebel as well as publicly denying the existence of God, he was not re-elected as representative to the House of Lords by his Scottish peers, which wounded his honour. (cf. Ellmann: 365) On the other hand, he gave no attention to his reception within society:

It was clear that this man would prove a formidable antagonist, eager for public gestures, as arrogantly indifferent as Wilde to what the world thought of him, and much less vulnerable. (Ellmann: 366)

Moreover, he was used to trial proceedings and confrontation with officials. In January 1887 his wife divorced from him because of adultery. After having remarried in November 1893, his wife "left him immediately, and started proceedings for annulment, alleging 'malformation of the parts of generation' as well as 'frigidity and impotency.'" (Ellmann: 381) Interestingly, his counsel in these proceedings was George Lewis, the same, who had solved his son's blackmail problem on account of Wilde earlier. (cf. Ellmann: 381)

Queensberry objected to the relationship between his son and Oscar Wilde and on some occasions tried to set his son under pressure by telling him he would cut his allowances if he continued meeting Wilde. Moreover, in 1894 "imputations of scandal involving Wilde and Douglas were so commonplace in London - that metropolitan small town - that the Marquess of Queensberry needed no private detectives to learn of them." (Ellmann: 386)

On April 1<sup>st</sup> 1894, shortly after Bosie and Wilde had reconciled, they coincidentally met Lord Queensberry at the Café Royal:

He regarded their lunching together as an open defiance of him, a sign his son had lapsed back into the old vile habits. They invited him to their table, however, and he was momentarily overborne by Wilde's charm. 'I don't wonder you are so fond of him,' he said to Douglas, 'he is a wonderful man.' (Ellmann: 363)

Afterwards, having thought about this encounter once more, Queensberry wrote an insulting letter to his son again threatening to cut allowances. Answering this letter the next day, Bosie sent him a telegram with the words: "WHAT A FUNNY LITTLE MAN YOU ARE." (Ellmann: 394) To this Queensberry then replied with a hateful letter in which he amongst other insults wrote:

You impertinent young jackanapes. [...] I will give you the trashing you deserve. If I catch you again with that man I will make a public scandal in a way you little dream of; it is already a suppressed one. [...] Unless this acquaintance ceases I shall carry out my threat and stop all supplies, and if you are not going to make any attempt to do something I shall certainly cut you down to a mere pittance, so you know what to expect. (quoted in Ellmann: 395)

Until February 1895 the scandal should maintain private, but Queensberry picked further quarrels.

On June 30<sup>th</sup> 1894, he made an unannounced visit to Tite Street that ended in a verbal escalation. (cf. Ellmann: 395-396) Frank Harris later recalls a conversation with Wilde, who told him about the incident:

A little later Oscar told me that Queensberry accompanied by a friend had called on him.

"What happened?" I asked.

"I said to him, 'I suppose, Lord Queensberry, you have come to apologise for the libellous letter you wrote about me?'"

"No, he replied, 'the letter was privileged; it was written to my son.'"

"How dared you say such a thing about your son and me?"

"You were both kicked out of The Savoy Hotel for disgusting conduct," he replied.

"That's untrue," I said, 'absolutely untrue.'

"You were blackmailed too for a disgusting letter you wrote to my son," he went on.

"I don't know who has been telling you all these silly stories," I replied, 'but they are untrue and quite ridiculous.'

"He ended up by saying that if he caught me and his son together again he would thrash me.

"I don't know what the Queensberry rules are," I retorted, 'but my rule is to shoot at sight in case of personal violence,' and with that I told him to leave my house."

"Of course he defied you?" I questioned.

"He was rude, Frank, and preposterous to the end."

As Oscar was telling me the story, it seemed to me as if another person were speaking through his mouth. The idea of Oscar "standing up" to Queensberry or "shooting at sight" was too absurd. Who was inspiring him? Alfred Douglas? (Harris: 187-188)

Shortly later, Wilde consulted his solicitor George Lewis in order to ask him to take action against Queensberry, but the latter refused due to the fact that he was acting for Queensberry in the case of annulment of the second marriage at that time. Humphreys, whom Wilde asked subsequently, then wrote a letter to Queensberry, telling him that if he would not retract his libels, he would risk a trial. Queensberry replied, insisting that there had been no direct accusation and that he would not want Wilde and his son ever to meet again. (cf. Ellmann: 397)

The climax was still to come but the next months it seemed that the situation had calmed down. Shortly before the premiere of *The Importance of Being Earnest* on February 14<sup>th</sup> 1894, Wilde accidentally heard that Queensberry was planning to make a public scene at the theatre. He alerted the theatre manager, George Alexander, who cancelled Queensberry's ticket and informed the police (cf. Ellmann: 406). On the evening of the premiere, Queensberry showed up at St James's Theatre:

After waiting outside for a while, the powerless Marquess left his bunch of carrots and turnips (described by Robert Sherard as a 'phallic bouquet') at the stage door and left muttering, to plan his next move. (Fryer: 128)

On February 18<sup>th</sup> 1895 Queensberry handed a card to Sidney Wright, the porter of the Albemarle Club, with the libel he would be prosecuted upon later. Because Wilde's next visit to the club was not until February 28<sup>th</sup> he just then received the card:

Wilde probably made out the words as 'To Oscar Wilde, ponce and Somdomite.' He did not smile at Queensberry's aristocratic misspelling, but took it as a written and public repetition of the charge Queensberry had made in Tite Street. What Queensberry actually wrote was 'To Oscar Wilde posing Somdomite,' but in court he said that the words were 'posing as a Somdomite,' an easier accusation to defend. What he had wanted, from leaving the card, was an interview. Wilde was goaded beyond that. (Ellmann: 412)

### **3 The Trial within the Work of Oscar Wilde**

#### **3.1 Short summary of an almost dramatic trial**

For reasons of simplification many texts – especially when not focussing on Oscar Wilde – refer to the different trials as a unit and to speak of ‘the Oscar Wilde trials’ does make sense as long as only the outcome is of importance for argumentation. Even though the most quoted and most interesting one is the libel trial against Lord Queensberry, there were several trials surrounding it: First of all there were the Magistrates’ Court Proceedings at Great Marlborough Street preceding the Central Criminal Court Proceedings *Regina (Oscar Wilde) versus John Douglas* at the Old Bailey, which was followed by the Central Criminal Court Proceedings *Regina versus Oscar Wilde and Alfred Taylor* and finally the two separate criminal trials against Alfred Taylor and Oscar Wilde, after which they both were sentenced to two years imprisonment with hard labour. Within this accumulation of major trials there were still more proceedings of minor interest such as the different sessions of the Grand Jury as well as the trials concerning Wilde’s bankruptcy.

Even though this paper will mainly focus on the libel trial and the first criminal trial against Wilde, a short overview shall be given<sup>16</sup> providing additional information.

##### **3.1.1 Prologue – Magistrates’ Court Proceedings**

There were two hearings initially to the libel trial in front of the Magistrate at Great Marlborough Street, which

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<sup>16</sup> The best description of the trials is the extensive introduction of H. Montgomery Hyde in his edition *The Trials of Oscar Wilde*. Though Richard Ellmann’s biography, seen as a whole, is a masterpiece, it is very weak in regard to the trials. Therefore the summary of the trials in this paper concentrates on Hyde’s introduction, because it is more detailed than what can be found in Ellmann’s book.

were more a formal necessity. At the first one on Saturday, March 2<sup>nd</sup> 1895 Sidney Wright, the hall porter of the Albemarle club, and Thomas Greet, detective-inspector of Scotland Yard, were examined and gave their evidence, at the second one on Saturday, March 9<sup>th</sup> 1895 Wilde and Queensberry made their depositions and "[f]ormal evidence not given at the first hearing was now taken." (Hyde: 35)

While the hearings themselves were not that impressive, there are some incidents within the periphery that are quite revealing. First, that Lord Queensberry had difficulties in finding a solicitor at the outset because of personal factors as well as the estimate that it would not be easy to defend him. Besides the letters and passages from Wilde's work, there was little evidence that could justify Queensberry's assault. (cf. Hyde: 32-33) There were rumours about Wilde's private life, but no substantive facts were available. Thus after Sir George Lewis declined, the case was handed to Charles Russel, who also did not want to defend Queensberry. Due to the need of an "experienced leading counsel" (Hyde: 33) the choice fell on Edward Carson, who had been with Wilde at Trinity College in Dublin. Wilde's reaction on this is told by Travers Humphreys:

When I told him that he would be cross-examined by Carson at the trial, Wilde immediately replied: "No doubt he will perform his task with all the added bitterness of an old friend." (Humphreys: 8)

Whether this personal relationship influenced Carson's decision is not sure, but what definitely influenced it, was that meanwhile Queensberry had employed several detectives to find evidence for Wilde's homosexuality - and they had been quite successful with the help of a voluntary witness, the actor Charles Brookfield. The results of the detectives' work were "names and addresses of numbers of young male homosexuals, mostly in the humbler walks of life, as well as other documents linking them with Wilde." (Hyde: 40-41)

Having already consulted Humphreys ten months before, Wilde approached him again in this affair and after the hearings at Great Marlborough Street, Humphreys cast a team of solicitors to represent the prosecution. Besides Willie Mathews, "a most experienced criminal practitioner" (Hyde: 39), also Edward Clarke accepted. He should inherit the role of leading counsel, because he was a "man of the highest personal integrity as well as a great forensic ability" (Hyde: 37) and having been solicitor-general himself beforehand, he was "established [...] in the foremost rank of English advocates." (Hyde: 37) A counter-argument for Clarke's refusal would have been that he and Wilde had never met until then, thus Clarke stated that he could only accept, if Wilde assured him, that 'there would not be and never would have been any foundation for the charges that were made against him' (Hyde: 38) and Wilde gave this promise contrary to the best of his knowledge. Clarke's belief in Wilde's words is no surprise, because even one of Wilde's closest friends throughout this period, Frank Harris, doubted the truth of the rumours, as he tells in his biographical work, until Wilde told him between the first and the second trial that they were true:

"Oh, Frank," [Wilde] said, "you talk with passion and conviction, as if I were innocent."  
"But you are innocent," I cried in amaze, "aren't you?"  
"No, Frank," he said, "I thought you knew that all along."  
I stared at him stupidly. "No," I said dully, "I did not know. I did not believe the accusation. I did not believe it for a moment."  
(Harris: 286)

If Clarke would have known about the details of Wilde's private life in the first place, he presumably would not have accepted to represent him in front of court. But once the case had been taken, he would defend Wilde until his imprisonment. Humphreys, as junior counsel directly involved, points at this, too, in his Foreword:

In giving to his solicitor, as he afterwards admitted, his solemn assurance of his innocence, Wilde lied, as did Lord Alfred Douglas, who accompanied him. None of Wilde's friends came forward to give to

the solicitor even a hint of the life Wilde had been leading [...]. The truth is that the two persons responsible for the *débâcle* were Oscar Wilde himself and his friend Lord Alfred Douglas. (Humphreys: 3-4)

The outcome of the trial was unclear at that time but it was sure that there would be a great public interest in the trials if not even a scandal. Having this in mind, many of Wilde's confidants and friends advised him to leave the country until oil was poured on troubled water. But Wilde refused to go:

"Everyone wants me to go abroad," replied Oscar in the same jesting mood. "I have just been abroad, and now I have come home again. One can't keep on going abroad, unless one is a missionary, or, what comes to the same thing, a commercial traveller." (Hyde: 43-44)

There is a situation that is often cited within this context, even though each of the attendees has its own story about it especially concerning the words that were spoken.<sup>17</sup> But the consistent part of it is that Oscar Wilde met Frank Harris, who was accompanied by Bernhard Shaw, at the Café Royal and Lord Alfred joined them later on. Harris and Shaw tried to convince Wilde that it would be better to flee. But when Bosie arrived, an argument started ending in an escalation with Douglas hastily escaping the café followed by Wilde.

This escalation can be understood by having a closer look on Bosie's attitude towards the trial as it is shown by Hyde:

What Douglas described as "our case" was really his private case against his father, and he failed to see at this stage, or at any time subsequently, that the evidence he wished to give would be held inadmissible in any English Court of law. It rested on the mistaken belief that Sir Edward Clarke would begin by launching a violent attack against Queensberry. [...] Douglas certainly appears to have expected that he would be allowed to depict Queensberry as outwardly pretending to be a solicitous father trying to save his son, whereas in fact he had behaved like an inhuman brute towards every member of his family. Douglas did not appreciate - indeed he never grasped the point as long as he lived - that such evidence as this had nothing to do with the issue to be decided at the trial, and that, even if he did go into the box, he would never be permitted to give it. (Hyde: 45-46)

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<sup>17</sup> This scene is described in many different versions (cf. Hyde: 44-45, Harris: 198-200, Shaw: 23-26) and also Lord Alfred refers to it in his letter to Frank Harris written in Nice in 1925, that was published in his autobiography as chapter XV, where he also mentions that he and Wilde knew about the content of the plea of justification. (cf. Douglas: 90-97)



That the whole situation would take a different turn would become clearer during the subsequent months and perhaps it would have been better, if Wilde had accepted the advice of his friends and fled to the continent.

### 3.1.2 Act One - The Libel Trial

On Wednesday, April 3<sup>rd</sup> 1895 the central criminal court proceedings began at the Old Bailey with immense public interest. The Crown, on behalf of Oscar Wilde, charged Lord Queensberry of criminally libelling the prosecutor. Queensberry was represented by Mr. Edward Carson, Mr. Charles Gill and Mr. Arthur Gill opposed by Oscar Wilde's counsels Sir Edward Clarke, Mr. Charles William Mathews and Mr. Travers Humphreys. (cf. Hyde: 46-47)

It is noteworthy that even though Lord Queensberry was charged, Oscar Wilde would have to defend himself subsequently against the justification of this libel and when reading the transcript of this trial, one can easily get the impression that Wilde would be the accused one. But this inverted situation makes the trial so revealing, because Wilde was confronted not only with literary excerpts but also had to vindicate his private life.

After the preliminaries Clarke held his opening speech for the prosecution and then first put the porter of the Albemarle Club in the box followed by Wilde himself. Shortly before lunch break, the cross-examination of Wilde by Carson started with an impressive scene. When asked about his age by Clarke in the preceding examination, Wilde answered that he was thirty-nine. Now he was confronted by Carson, who as a schoolmate of Wilde knew better, with his birth certificate that proved him to be forty - almost forty-one:

It was a small point, but at the very outset Wilde had been detected in a stupid lie, the effect of which was not lost upon the jury, particularly when Carson followed it up by contrasting Wilde's true age with that of Lord Alfred Douglas, with whom the witness admitted to having stayed at many places both in England and on the Continent. (Hyde: 50)

When having a closer look at the trial, it is understood best if divided into two logical units: on the one hand the literary part, where textual evidence was provided and Wilde had to answer questions concerning his own work as well as texts of authors in his surroundings, on the other hand the factual part, confronting Wilde with names, facts and incidents of his supposedly homosexual private life.

At the first day of the proceedings the focus was on literary evidence like *Dorian Gray*, the Oxford undergraduate magazine *The Chameleon*, to which Wilde contributed his *Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young* and in which a morally controversial story about homosexuality and church was published, namely *The Priest and the Acolyte*. Moreover Wilde was examined on letters of him to Lord Alfred Douglas, which marks the boundary towards the factual part, because afterwards Carson addressed himself to the factual evidence, mainly with help of the material gathered by the private detectives Queensberry had engaged. (cf. Hyde: 50-51)

Thus, during the afternoon of the first and the morning of the second day, the situation gradually got tenser:

[A]s name after name rolled from Carson's uncompromising lips the witness showed signs of impatience, his own counsel began to feel uncomfortable and the faces of the middle class jury got longer and longer. The questions now had a particularity about them which made Sir Edward Clarke distinctly uneasy. (Hyde: 52)

Scandalous about the facts now presented was that Wilde had been acquainted to a couple of young men<sup>18</sup> of lower social

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<sup>18</sup> Where necessary the persons mentioned will be introduced exemplary. They all were "either grooms or valets or else out of employment" (Hyde: 52) and supposed to be homosexual, male prostitutes and blackmailers, many of them being introduced to Wilde by Alfred Taylor, who was accused of procuring for Wilde and other men. The only exception was Edward Shelley, an employee of Wilde's publisher John Lane, who introduced Shelley to him.

standing whom he had met on several occasions and provided them with presents and money, which raised the suspicion of blackmail. (cf. Hyde: 51-52)

In his re-examination Clarke first came back to the actual topic by questioning Wilde on the Queensberry's insults and in the afternoon, after everyone supposed Wilde to have escaped because he returned from lunch with delay, Clarke tried to prove that Wilde's contacts to the persons mentioned and the presents made to them were above suspicion and motivated by highly moral interests. (cf. Hyde: 53) He then closed his case surprisingly:

Everyone who followed the case in Court - at least all the lay onlookers - expected Clarke to put Lord Alfred Douglas in the box immediately Wilde had left it. The handsome fair-haired young man was both ready and eager to give evidence, and great surprise was expressed on all sides when Clarke intimated that his case was closed and sat down. (Hyde: 54)

Now Carson opened the case for the defence and during his opening speech proposed to put several of the young men into the box for examination, so they could give evidence against Wilde. Because of this, he would not end his opening speech the next morning as planned and "Queensberry never reached the witness box, since the prosecution was withdrawn while his counsel was still opening his defence." (Hyde: 55) Meanwhile, on the next morning before the proceedings were continued, Clarke and the other counsels met with Wilde and discussed the further proceedings:

In these circumstances [Clarke] thought it best for his client to withdraw from the prosecution and allow him to make a statement to the Court, consenting to a verdict as regards the charge of "posing". [...] Mathews, who was one of the two junior counsel, was for fighting the case to a finish, since, as he pointed out, the witnesses whom Carson had indicated his intention of calling were all self-confessed accomplices and themselves criminals whose testimony might well be discredited, and he regarded the case as far from lost. However, Clarke's advice prevailed and his client agreed with it. (Hyde: 56)

Humphreys, who was also present, remembers that:

the explanation that Wilde's interest in such persons was no more than an expression of his innocent love for youth in all its aspects began to ring terribly hollow, and we at least who were representing him realized that the case was lost. (Humphreys: 2)

So, Clarke interrupted Carson's speech in order to withdraw the prosecution. His speech was "carefully prepared beforehand" and "uttered under great emotion." (Hyde: 56-57) The jury adjourned and after a short time returned with the verdict of not guilty and claiming the libel to be true and published for the public benefit as stated in the plea of justification (cf. Hyde: 56-57). Thus the whole affair ended for Queensberry, but it just should start for Wilde: "He had saved his reputation as a writer of books and plays, but as a man he had almost confessed to having at least 'posed' as the libel alleged." (Humphreys: 2)

### 3.1.3 Act Two - The First Criminal Trial

Immediately after the Queensberry trial the decision was made that a warrant for Wilde's arrest should be applied, which then was granted, with a slight delay, in the late afternoon. There is speculation if this delay was intended to give Wilde the chance to flee; many friends, especially Robert Ross, again advised to do so (cf. Hyde: 58-59). However, Wilde, being at the Cadogan Hotel, refused and it seems that he was totally paralysed:

He remained in a pathetic state of indecision lamenting that "the train has gone" and that "it is too late." [...] Oscar sat on with his two friends, Robert Ross and Reginald Turner, glumly waiting for the blow to fall and drinking glass after glass of hock and seltzer in an endeavour to steady his nerves. (Hyde: 59-60)

At about half past six Wilde was arrested and at Scotland Yard the warrant, charging him with committing acts of gross indecency with various male persons, was read to him. Then he was taken to Bow Street police station, where he was lead to

one of the cells. Rumours very quickly spread all over London and beyond:

That evening the sensational developments of the day were being discussed in hundreds of bars and clubs and homes throughout the country, and pundits of the "I-told-you-so" type were sanctimoniously holding forth on the dangers of art and literature, at least when pursued by Mr. Oscar Wilde. To their discredit the newspaper surpassed themselves in their vulgar gloating. (Hyde: 62)

Travers Humphreys applied several times for bail in vain. Magistrate John Bridge refused, also towards the application of Alfred Taylor, with the words: "With regard to the gravity of the case, I think there is no worse crime than that with which the prisoners are charged." (quoted in Hyde: 63) The Police Court proceedings on April 6<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> were quite unimpressive. Only two details are interesting: On the one hand Taylor was offered freedom, if he would function as King's Evidence, which he refused. (cf. Hyde: 64-65) On the other hand it was a little sensation, "although its full implication was not generally realized till the trial" (Hyde: 65), that Atkins, who had been accompanying Wilde to Paris, mentioned a certain Maurice Schwabe:

Reference had been made to [him] [...] during the Queensberry trial, but his name had been written down on a piece of paper and handed up to the judge without actually being mentioned. This reticence was due to the fact that the individual in question was a nephew by marriage of the Solicitor-General [Sir Frank Lockwood]. (Hyde: 62)

Wilde was still in arrest and meanwhile had been moved to Holloway Prison. There he was all by himself. Most friends did not have any contact with him and a couple of them had left England to the Continent in order to save their own skin and wait there until the coast was clear again. (cf. Hyde: 67) Additionally, the artist Wilde became a pariah in society as well:

*An Ideal Husband* was withdrawn from the Haymarket Theatre on the day of his arrest; and, though by a seemingly ignoble compromise, as a result of which his name was pasted over on the bills advertising *The Importance of Being Earnest* at the St. James's Theatre, the life of this play was prolonged for a few weeks, it too came to an end. (Hyde: 69)

The Criminal Trial *Regina versus Oscar Wilde and Alfred Taylor* began on April 2<sup>nd</sup> 1895 at the Old Bailey and lasted for five days. Mr. Justice Arthur Charles was the presiding judge and the prosecution consisted of Mr. Charles Gill, Mr. Horace Avory and Mr. Arthur Gill, the three counsels that already represented Wilde in the libel trial also did so now and Alfred Taylor was represented by Mr. John Peter Grain. Besides charges of committing acts of gross indecency towards each of the two, there were also charges of conspiracy, both persons were accused of together. Ironically these charges were withdrawn by Charles Gill for the Crown after the prosecution closed the case. (cf. Hyde: 70-71) "This provoked Clarke to rejoin that, if this course had been followed in the first instance, he would have applied for the two prisoners to be tried separately." (Hyde: 72)

Most of the witnesses, the two brothers Parker, Wood and Atkins were all admitted accomplices with the exception of Edward Shelley, further evidence was given by formal police witnesses and various hotel servants and employees. (cf. Hyde: 73) Of course, Wilde was examined, too, but this time without the self-assurance he had shown at his first appearance during the Queensberry trial:

On going into the witness box early on the fourth day of the trial Wilde made no attempt to show off, as he had done on the previous occasion. (Hyde: 73)

But even though he was not as constantly eloquent as the first time, he gave the presumably most quoted statement of the whole trials by defining 'the love that dare not speak its name', which was honoured with spontaneous applause and perhaps had an influence on the trials outcome that should not be underestimated. (cf. Hyde: 73-74)

Regarding the further discussion there are two causes for this and the subsequent trial to be of minor interest: On the one hand the literary work was out of focus as the records of

the first trial were brought in, on the other hand Wilde's examination was quite tedious and besides the passage about *Two Loves* provides much less material for interpretation than his statements given in the first trial.

Very emotional again was the closing address of Wilde's counsel Sir Edward Clarke:

His words were chosen with great care, and he contrasted in most telling language the instinctive shrinking of the guilty victims of the blackmailers' frightful trade and the openness with which Wilde had himself sought to have the charges against him investigated and the courage which had brought him into the witness box. The most moving passages of all were uttered in his peroration when he implored the jurors to dismiss from their minds what was irrelevant to the case and in their resulting deliberations to gratify many thousands of hopes by exonerating one of the most renowned and accomplished men of letters of that day. This effort on Clarke's part brought tears to the eyes of his client in the dock and, as a murmur of appreciation ran round the Court, the prisoner wrote a note of thanks which was handed down to his learned counsel. (Hyde: 47)

After the summing-up by Justice Charles, in which he also mentioned that within the preceding weeks one could not have ignored the constant media coverage referring to the case, the jury withdrew for almost four hours and returned the verdict of not guilty towards the charges concerning Atkins and pronounced that they were unable to reach a verdict on all other counts. (cf. Hyde: 47-75)

Having this in mind, it is open to speculation if Oscar Wilde would have reached an acquittal on all counts, if he and Taylor would have been tried separately - then the impact on the jury through the passages concerning Taylor would not have existed:

Had this been so, and had the jurors' minds not clearly been impregnated with prejudicial press comments, there is a strong chance that on the evidence offered by the prosecution he would have been acquitted on all the counts with which he was charged. (Hyde: 75)

#### 3.1.4 Act Three - The Second Criminal Trial

After the second trial the application for bail was accepted, the total amount of the sureties was £5.000. £2.500

each were provided by Lord Douglas of Hawick, eldest living son of Lord Queensberry, and Reverend Steward Headlam, a clergyman who sympathised with Wilde due to the hostility of the public and the press he had to withstand even though he did not know him personally. Thus, Wilde was released on May 7<sup>th</sup> 1895 and immediately his friends advised him again to 'jump' his bail and go abroad - he once more resisted. (cf. Hyde: 75-77, 79)

Finding a place to stay would be far more challenging than Wilde had expected. To whichever hotel he went, he was asked to leave, because Lord Queensberry had engaged a couple of persons and instructed them to convey that Wilde would not be welcomed. They even were successful in the suburbia, where Wilde thought to be unknown and therefore would stand a chance. Finally he went Oakley Street, Chelsea, where his mother was living with his brother Willie. When arriving there, he broke down on the pavement out of exhaustion. (cf. Hyde: 77)

Contrary to his friends, his relatives advised him to stay: "Both his eccentric mother and his brother, a drunken ne'er-do-well, kept telling him that he must behave like an Irish gentleman and face the music." (Hyde: 77) One cause for this presumably was that Lady Wilde as well as her husband had been in Court when living in Ireland. (Rademacher: 18, 29) Rademacher points out that in this regard he modelled himself on her: "Angeregt durch einen Prozeß in England, soll er [...] verkündet haben: 'Im späteren Leben würde ihm nichts so gut gefallen [...] [wie] als Beklagter in einem Verfahren zwischen der Königin und Wilde in die Nachwelt einzugehen'." (Rademacher: 26)

After the news about Wilde's situation spread, two women supported him: Mrs. Adela Schuster, who sent him financial aid in order to prevent a feared bankruptcy, and one of his best



friends Ada Leveson, lovingly called 'The sphinx' by Wilde, who invited him to stay at her house in Courtfield Gardens until his trial, an invitation he gladly accepted; so he stayed there until May 20<sup>th</sup>, the date he had to surrender his bail at the Old Bailey. (cf. Hyde: 78, 81)

In the meantime the new trial was prepared by the prosecution and there were some remarkable occurrences:

It had already leaked out that [the prosecution] would be led, not by Charles Gill, as at the previous trial, but by Sir Frank Lockwood, the Solicitor-General. Thus it appeared as if the Crown was now determined to make every effort towards securing a conviction. To one member of the Bar at least such a course did not commend itself. This was Edward Carson who had defended Queensberry at the first trial, but who had refused to have anything to do with the subsequent proceedings against Wilde. (Hyde: 78-79)

It seems that he had lost an old enemy who was replaced by someone who would prosecute him with a vengeance. It has to be mentioned that Lockwood had been appointed by Lord Rosebery<sup>19</sup>.

The criminal trial *Regina versus Oscar Wilde and Alfred Taylor* opened at the Old Bailey on May 21<sup>st</sup> 1895. Wilde and Taylor were defended by the same counsels as in the previous trial and the prosecution, lead by the Solicitor-General Sir Frank Lockwood, was furthermore represented by Mr. Charles Gill, who had lead the prosecution in the first criminal trial, and Mr. Horace Avory. In this second criminal trial Clarke applied again that the defendants should be tried seperately, because the conspiracy charges had been withdrawn in the first one, and this time the application was granted by the bench. His claim that Wilde's name first appeared on the indictment and he thus should be tried first was, however, unsuccessful. (cf. Hyde: 82)

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<sup>19</sup> Lord Archibald Philip Primrose Roseberry had been Foreign Secretary in 1886 as well as from 1892-1894, then he became Prime Minister. During the first trial special letters could not be examined due to the fact that his name was mentioned and there should be no reference to his name throughout the trial. (cf. Hyde: 35-36) This was because he was supposed to be homosexual as well and being the cause for the death of Lord Dumlaring, Queensberry's eldest son on October 18<sup>th</sup> 1894: "The newspapers reported a shooting accident, but suicide was generally suspected. Dumlaring may have been afraid of blackmail over his relations with Lord Rosebery, of which his father had long been suspicious, and (unlike his brother) feared he would bring down the Foreign Minister as well as himself." (Ellmann: 402)

Indeed, the presiding judge, this time Sir Alfred Wills, added that he and the jury would care for the two trials not having any influence on each other. (cf. Hyde: 83) In opposition to this statement stands the fact that after Taylor had been tried and the jury had returned a verdict of guilty, Justice Wills postponed his sentence until after Wilde's proceedings, so it is not beside the point to state that there actually was an interrelation between both trials. "Taylor put up a good showing in the face of severe and, as his defending counsel thought, unfair tactics on the part of the Solicitor-General, but his guilt was clear almost from the beginning." (Hyde: 83) So if there was an impact of Taylor's trial on Wilde's verdict, it definitely would not have been a positive one.

The visual appearance of Wilde entering the dock on May 22<sup>nd</sup> might have had its share in this influenced attitude of the jury as well, because he looked more a broken man than a celebrated man of letters:

He looked haggard; his hair, usually so neatly dressed, was in disorder; and his voice sounded hollow and husky. His formersparkle and verve seemed to have deserted him entirely. At his counsel's request he was allowed to remain seated while giving evidence. (Hyde: 78-79)

The proceedings itself can be seen as a repetition of the previous ones. Since the jury consisted of new members much of the evidence already given in Taylor's as well as the first criminal and the Queensberry trial had to be presented and recapitulated. One innovation was that the judge directed an acquittal on the counts concerning the commitment of indecent acts with Edward Shelley due to lacking corroboration. (cf. Hyde: 86-87)

In his final speech, which did not only raise applause from the audience but also was valued highly by Lockwood, Sir Edward Clarke made a point that had been lead to Section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act being dubbed 'the blackmailer's

charter' even when it had been discussed while passing Parliament (cf. Dynes. 283):

"This trial," he said, "seems to be operating as an act of indemnity for all blackmailers in London. Wood and Parker, in giving evidence, have established for themselves a sort of statute of limitations. In testifying on behalf of the Crown, they have secured immunity for past rogueries and indecencies." (Hyde: 89)

In the afternoon of May 25<sup>th</sup>, after the jury had been retired for more than three hours, a note was sent to the judge that they had a question, which caused arousal in the audience who believed this to be an indicator for an acquittal. After this question turned out to be quite unimportant, the jury retired again before after a few moments they returned a verdict of guilty on all counts with exception of the count concerning Shelley. Justice Wills then passed the maximum sentence that Section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendments Act stipulated: two years imprisonment with hard labour. (cf. Hyde: 91)

The ending of this trial provides the most dramatic scenery: "Taylor heard his sentence with seemingly indifference, but the other tragic frock-coated figure in the dock swayed slightly, his face suffused with horror, and tried to utter a few words of protest." (Hyde: 91) The words chosen by Justice Wills speak for themselves:

Mr. Justice Wills - [...]

(To the prisoners) - Oscar Wilde and Alfred Taylor, the crime of which you have been convicted is so bad that one has to put stern restraint upon one's self to prevent one's self from describing, in language which I would rather not use, the sentiments which must rise to the breast of every man of honour who has heard the details of these two terrible trials. That the jury have arrived at a correct verdict in this case I cannot persuade myself to entertain the shadow of a doubt; and I hope, at all events, that those who sometimes imagine that a judge is half-hearted in the cause of decency and morality because he takes care no prejudice shall enter into the case, may see that that is consistent at least with the utmost sense of indignation at the horrible charges brought home to both of you.

It is no use for me to address you. People who can do these things must be dead to all sense of shame, and one cannot hope to produce any effect upon them. It is the worst case I have ever tried. That you, Taylor, kept a kind of male brothel it is impossible to doubt. And that you, Wilde, have been the centre of a circle of extensive corruption of the most hideous kind among young men, it is equally impossible to doubt.

I shall, under such circumstances, be expected to pass the severest sentence that the law allows. In my judgement it is totally inadequate for such a case as this. The sentence of the Court is that each of you be imprisoned and kept to hard labour for two years.

[Some cries of "Oh! Oh!" and "Shame" were heard in Court.]

Oscar Wilde - And I? May I say nothing?

[His lordship made no reply beyond a wave of the hand to the warders, who hurried the prisoners out of sight.]

The Jury were discharged.

The Court adjourned.

(Hyde: 339)

Outside the Court the verdict was celebrated and acclaimed wildly, people "literally dance with joy." (Hyde: 92) Meanwhile Wilde was hauled out and later brought to Wandsworth prison, where he was kept for six month before being transferred to Reading Gaol. (cf. Hyde: 92)

Nevertheless, Hyde in his introduction points out to a remarkable and impressive evaluation of the trial outcome:

[I]t is perhaps not generally realized how near Sir Edward Clarke was to getting his client off altogether. That an acquittal on all counts was confidently expected by the prosecution, in spite of the vigour with which the Crown's case had been pressed, is evident from the remark dropped by Lockwood to Clarke after the jury had retired to consider their verdict: "You'll dine your man in Paris to-morrow." (Hyde: 85)

## **3.2 The Trial Transcripts as Literary Artefacts**

### 3.2.1 Staging a trial

There are many examples of plays that deal with trials like Agatha Christie's *Witness for the Prosecution* or Reginald Rose's *Twelve Angry Men*, so it is no surprise that there is a play, written by the French playwright Maurice Rostand in 1935, called *Le procès d'Oscar Wilde*. Even though it claims to be historical, and adopting excerpts of the trials to a certain extent it is in parts authentic, it is mainly a

mystifying transfiguration like most plays about historical figures.

But what it shows within the context of this paper is the stage-able nature of the trials. This leads to the question: If excerpts of a trial can be adopted for the stage, why then not try to identify the 'stage' of Court?

Especially this special dramatic affair imposes the question on the reader; one has not to read one Jung's *Wotan* properly to find the archetype riverbeds<sup>20</sup> that the different persons are flooding: the seemingly innocent and beautiful, young beloved; the caring lover, serving as substitute father and guiding his beloved through an evil world; the vengeful father trying to separate both because of his infringed honour and hiding his reaction behind a veil of protection for his son; additionally the main characters are surrounded by highly eloquent counsels and artist friends - a *dramatis personae* that could have been invented by Wilde himself<sup>21</sup>.

Almost all sources report the trials to be a spectacle, not only because of their scandalous content, but also because the performance of the participants was unusually 'artificial', meaning many effects in dramaturgy, rhetorically brilliant language and upcoming scenes that would have been worthy to be painted - all together much entertainment. These are only some of the causes, why there was such a public interest in the trials. Even the Magistrate's Proceedings seem

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<sup>20</sup> In his essay "Wotan" Jung draws following comparison on his archetypes: "Archetypes are like riverbeds which dry up when the water deserts them, but which it can find again at any time. An archetype is like an old watercourse along which the water of life has flowed for centuries, digging a deep channel for itself. The longer it has flowed in this channel the more likely it is that sooner or later the water will return." (Jung: 189)

<sup>21</sup> Cohen develops a similar analogy: "[I]t had all the elements of a good drawing-room comedy - or, in Freudian terms, of a good family romance. The characters were exact: the neurotic but righteous outraged father (the Marquis of Queensbury [sic]), the prodigal and effeminate son (Alfred Douglas), and the degenerate old man who came between them (Wilde). Wilde was portrayed as the corrupting artist who dragged young Alfred Douglas away from the realm of paternal solitude down into the London underworld, where homosexuality, blackmail, and mal prostitution sucked the lifeblood of morality from his tender body. How could such a story have failed to engage the public imagination?" (Cohen: 68-69)

more like taking place in The Globe than at Great Marlborough Street:

When the case was called shortly after 11.30 on the morning of 9th March, there was hardly even standing room, and numbers of prominent people, who had endeavoured to obtain seats beside the magistrate on the Bench, were disappointed. (Hyde: 34)

Hyde's description of the opening of the Queensberry trial depicts a similar image - adding the humour of a theatre audience:

As the Court filled up more than an hour before the judge was due to take his seat on the bench, someone made a joke about "the importance of being early," which raised a laugh. Soon there was not a seat or corner to be had, while the gangways were crowded with curious bystanders. (Hyde: 47)

The crowd, like in ancient times, came to see the Emperor's thumb move after a verbal slaughter - and they were not to be disappointed. Harris opens up his recollections of Carson's cross-examination of Wilde with the words: "Mr. Carson rose and the death duel began." (Harris: 207)

As Sarat points out, it is not uncommon that in a trial much depends on language and on the way facts are presented:

Law is, in general, and trials are, more particularly, a stage for the display of verbal skill, linguistic virtuosity and persuasive argument in which words take on a seriousness virtually unparalleled in any other domain of human experience. (Sarat: 367)

But it is presumably uncommon that everybody in a trial has the talent to fulfil this need. That Wilde would make an outstanding performance was to be expected, but that the others, namely Clarke and Carson, would suffice this requirement makes it a really remarkable trial.

There are many references in secondary literature that prove that the participants not only were brilliant in their performance, but also that the opposing side honoured their achievements, as it is the case regarding Clarke's opening speech: "'I never heard anything to equal it in all my life,' Carson said afterwards to a friend in the House of Commons." (Hyde: 48)

Having received a similar education to Wilde when being at Trinity College together with him, Carson was also very eloquent as Harris reports, even though Harris at this point thinks Wilde to be superior:

All this while Mr. Carson had been hitting at a man on his own level; but Oscar Wilde was above him and not one of his blows had taken effect. Every moment, too, Oscar grew more and more at his ease, and the combat seemed to be completely in his favour. (Harris: 208)

A similar description can be found in Douglas' autobiography<sup>22</sup>:

Poor Oscar scintillated brilliantly in the witness-box. His answers in cross-examination bristled with polished wit, and from the point of view of mere verbal repartee he "scored off" Carson again and again. But from the point of view of winning his case or getting the jury on his side (which ought to be the aim of every witness) he was hopeless. (Douglas: 105)

The discrepancy Douglas describes leads to a crucial difference between Court as a stage and Court as a place where serious decisions have to be made and a verdict has to be found. This difference is the addressee of the statements made: On the one hand, there is the audience that can easily be impressed by eloquence and good performance, on the other there is a jury that is urged to facts and has to come to a decision later on. In this instance a good performance can also have a negative effect:

The more brilliant and amusing and witty Oscar became, the more the jury hated him and totted up the points against him. When Carson had finished, Clarke re-examined without repairing any of the damage, and the next day chucked up the case and left his client to the tender mercies of the police and the Public Prosecutor! (Douglas: 106)

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<sup>22</sup> Generally speaking, one can state that Douglas's autobiography is quite unreliable and has to be dealt with care. Through this work – as well as other later works of him – he tries to correct his past and deny his lifestyle of his youth. On the one hand he disavows his relation to homosexuality, even though it is generally assumed that he was much more experienced in this field than Wilde, when they met for the first time: "I had long ceased to have any connection with the Wilde gang or cult." (Douglas: 33) On the other hand he emphasises a bourgeois life he lives while writing his autobiography: "The difference between Ross and me was that while I, as a boy of twenty, had come under Wilde's influence and had got myself mixed up in the awful gang that surrounded him, I had long since (more than twelve years then) escaped out of it all. I had married within a little more than a year of Wilde's death, and I was living a happy, healthy and normal life with my wife and child. Ross, on the other hand, had become more and more obsessed with the dreadful vice which had been the bane of Oscar Wilde." (Douglas: 42) As can be seen in this quote, besides stressing his pseudo-happy family life, he claims Ross to be a rival. Throughout his whole autobiography, he constantly points out that Ross's biographical texts on Wilde – as well as the ones written by Harris – are merely accumulations of lies in order to accuse him.

Even though these words reveal some bitterness between the lines, Douglas' point is clear - one has to keep in mind that Wilde was not only in the dock because of his deeds (directly) but also because of his person (indirectly) and the more he showed off, the more he supported the disgust of his opponents.

Nonetheless, Humphreys in his foreword honours that Wilde, as a judicial laymen, was able to object to Carson's manoeuvres:

Those who obtained admission certainly had their fill of sensation and had the opportunity of listening to as brilliant and damaging cross-examination by Edward Carson as was ever administered to a prosecutor in a criminal case. The witness was in every respect the equal in ability of the counsel; and, so long as the cross-examination was confined to the subject of his writings, many thought that Wilde had scored as many points as Carson. (Humphreys: 2)

As there are a lot more examples to show that this trial was literally 'dramatic', only one example shall be given. At the beginning of his introduction Hyde also mentions the famous defence statements made in the context of the cross-examination concerning *Two Loves*, which later will be analysed in detail:

In the second trial the accused's description of Platonic love as existing between an elder and a younger man produced an extraordinary outburst of applause in Court which undoubtedly contributed to the jury's failure to agree upon a verdict. Wilde's remarks were described by some who heard them as the finest speech of an accused man since that of Paul before King Herod Agrippa. (Hyde: 9)

That there is a drama-like quality in the trials should be clear by now, but how this can be used as a starting point of interpretation regarding Wilde's literary work, has to be shown in further, detailed analysis.

### 3.2.2 Fiction but Facts - The Literary Evidence

Before discussing selected passages of the trials, a closer look at some central ideas in Wilde's conception of aestheticism is crucial, because these ideas are underlying



most of Wilde's arguments - even though there sometimes would emerge contradictions, if his statements would be transferred strictly according to these views. In his philosophy art has a special significance. In his narrative essay *The Decay of Lying* the dominant character tells his friend about an article he wrote on the topic, in which he also expresses his view on the relations between nature and art and truth and art.

The pivotal statement of his argumentation is: "Paradox though it may seem - and paradoxes are always dangerous things - it is none the less true that Life imitates art far more than Art imitates life." (DoL: 74)

According to literature he proves this by retelling cases in which persons acted like novel protagonists after they read their story and comes to the conclusion that "[w]e are merely carrying out, with footnotes and unnecessary additions the whim or fancy or creative vision of a great novelist." (DoL: 75) He then goes beyond that and points out, that art even has an impact on our reception: "Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us." (DoL: 79)

This being so, he develops this thought further. One can only recognise the beauty in things, not the things *per se*. So the device that creates beauty, namely style, indirectly shapes our beliefs: "It is style that makes us believe in a thing - nothing but style." (DoL: 83) Thus, the nature of truth is revealed: "[T]he great secret of all her [i.e. art's] manifestations, the secret that Truth is entirely and absolutely a matter of style." (DoL: 72)

### 3.2.2.1 The Priest and the Acolyte

As mentioned, during the Queensberry trial Wilde was examined on several literary texts. Because his *Phrases and*

*Philosophies for the Use of the Young* had been published in the Oxford homoerotic undergraduate magazine *The Chameleon*, Carson also referred to *The Priest and the Acolyte*, which also was published in this volume. It is a poem, written by John Francis Bloxam, about a priest who falls in love with an altar boy and after the detection of this affair commits suicide:

CARSON: You read 'The Priest and the Acolyte'?  
WILDE: Yes.  
CARSON: You have no doubt whatsoever that that was not an improper contribution?  
WILDE: From a literary point of view, I think it highly improper.  
CARSON: Do you only disapprove of it from a literary point of view?  
WILDE: It is impossible for a man of letters to judge of a piece of writings otherwise than from its fault in literature. [...] I mean, I couldn't criticise a book as if it was a piece of actual life.  
(Holland, 2003: 68)

Right from the beginning Wilde tries to incorporate his primate of art into his defence by arguing that the poem can only be valuated in terms of literary criteria. Wilde underlines his view more clearly a little later by disavowing that literature as such can be connected to morality:

CARSON: I think you are of the opinion, Mr. Wilde, that there is no such thing as an immoral book?  
WILDE: Yes.  
[...]  
CARSON: Then, I suppose I may take it that in your opinion the piece was not immoral?  
WILDE: Worse, it is badly written. (*Laughter.*)  
(Holland, 2003: 68-69)

One can say that Carson transformed this poem - better Wilde's interpretation of it - into a paratextual element of Wilde's work. The opinion referred to here, is one of the aphorisms Wilde used in the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*:

There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written.  
[...]  
The moral life of man forms part of the subject-matter of the artist, but the morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium.  
[...]  
No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style. (*Dorian Gray*: 3)

Even though Carson subsequently tries to push Wilde to an answer, that could reveal his interpretation of the poem, the only ending which could be that he had to make a statement to the homosexual content, because of the poems obviousness, Wilde does not give this answer and mainly argues like in the quoted passage. Because Wilde had already mentioned his disapproval of the text - even though not motivated by the causes Carson wanted him to, Clarke interposes with regard to an interesting point; the question is, if Wilde's view does serve the quest of finding evidence for Queensberry's libel:

CLARKE: [...] it is a very strange thing that he should be cross-examined as to the contents of a book which he disapproved of.  
JUDGE: No, not as to its contents, but as to his view of the contents with a view to seeing what was meant by saying that he disapproved.  
CARSON: Yes.  
JUDGE: I think it is quite relevant.  
CLARKE: We are not dealing here with matters of literary criticism or literary taste.  
CARSON: No, we are not.  
(Holland, 2003: 69)

Then Carson went on with his examination.

This passage shows also the attitude of Justice Collins, who could have been intervened but clearly takes sides with Carson in this question. As will be seen later, by connecting Wilde's view on *The Priest and the Acolyte* to his own supposed homosexuality, which openly speaking was the only topic of the trial, they indirectly integrate his statements into the paratextual cloud surrounding Wilde's work. The statement that has to be defended - one should not forget that formally Queensberry was the accused - is whether Wilde through his habits and views could encourage that one might think he is homosexual. This is now hinted at by Carson:

CARSON: I want to see what position you pose in.  
WILDE: Now, that is not the way to talk to me - 'to pose as'. I am not posing as anything.  
CARSON: Yes; I beg your pardon.  
(Holland, 2003: 70)

Combining the question of 'posing' with the fact discussed beforehand that Wilde in his public appearance was a kind of performance of himself, this would mean that confessing to 'pose as homosexual' would implicate that this was done wilfully, if not even consciously. Perhaps Wilde recognised this problem at this stage of the trial, even though it would not help him later when being confronted with the 'hard facts'. One could even argue that the justification of the withdrawal of the prosecution by Clarke during Carson's opening speech was a weak compromise and the last effort to prevent Wilde from the worst.

Even at the closure of this passage, before Carson went on to his next point, Wilde sticks to the strategy of the beginning:

CARSON: I am asking you, supposing a person had been connected with the production or had approved of it in public, would you say he was posing as a sodomite?

WILDE: I should say he had very bad literary taste.  
(Holland, 2003: 72)

### 3.2.2.2 Phrases and Philosophies

Shortly later the paratextual character of the examination becomes even more obvious. Carson went on to confront Wilde with his own literary work by examining him on his *Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young*, which had been published together with *The Priest and the Acolyte* in *The Chameleon*:

CARSON: Do you think that they were articles to tend - maxims likely to tend - to immorality amongst young men?

WILDE: My work never aims at producing any effect but that of literature.

[...]

CARSON: May I take it that you are not concerned whether it has a moral or an immoral effect?

WILDE: I don't myself believe that any book or work of art ever produces any effect on conduct at all. I don't believe it.

[...]

WILDE: [...] I do my own work in writing a plot, a book, anything. I am concerned entirely with literature, that

is with Art. The aim is not to do good or to do evil, but to try and make a thing that will have some quality of beauty that is to be attained or in the form of beauty and of wit and of emotion.

(Holland, 2003: 74)

Amongst others, this is a scene where Wilde argues that "[a]rt never expresses anything but itself." (DoL: 80) But this interpretation following the art for art's sake thinking, is somewhat contradictory to the phrases themselves, that were written and published as the title expresses 'for the use of the young'. Even though Carson tried to solve this ambiguity, Wilde's answers stayed imprecise.

He argues from the position of his aesthetic philosophy and extends his argument even to the point, where he undermines 'truth' by claiming that it is not a category applicable to literature:

CARSON: Listen, sir. Here is one of your 'Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young': 'Wickedness is a myth invented by good people to account for the curious attractiveness of others.' (Laughter.)  
WILDE: Yes.  
CARSON: Do you think that is true?  
WILDE: I rarely think that anything I write is true. (Laughter.)  
[...]  
CARSON: Nothing you ever write is true?  
WILDE: Not true in the sense of correspondence to fact; to represent wilful moods of paradox, of fun, nonsense, of anything at all - but not true in the actual sense of correspondence to actual facts of life, certainly not; I should be very sorry to think it.

(Holland, 2003: 74)

It seems that he is now not far from the attitude his protagonist in *The Decay of Lying* has: "The only form of lying that is absolutely beyond reproach is lying for its own sake, and the highest development of this is, as we have already pointed out, Lying in Art." (DoL: 85)

But Wilde seems to misunderstand that Carson's examination is not art and that he is now - and on other occasions during the trial - the normal liar, he criticised; he lies for a personal advantage. This directly leads to the

next of his phrases at which one wants to intervene and shout that if one tells a lie one is perhaps surer to be found out:

CARSON: 'If one tells the truth one is sure sooner or later to be found out'?

WILDE: Yes, I think that is a very pleasing paradox, but I don't set any high store on that as an axiom. (*Laughter.*)

CARSON: Do you think it was a good educational axiom for youth?

WILDE: Anything that stimulates thought in people of any age is good for them. (*Laughter.*)

[...]

CARSON: Whether moral or immoral?

WILDE: Thought is never either one or the other.

CARSON: No such thing as an immoral thought?

WILDE: No, there are immoral emotions, but thought is an intellectual thing, at least that is the way I use the word.

CARSON: Listen to this: 'Pleasure is the only thing one should live for, nothing ages like happiness.' Do you think pleasure is the only thing that one should live for?

WILDE: I think self-realisation - realisation of one's self - is the primal aim of life. I think that to realise one's self through pleasure is finer than to realise one's self through pain. That is the pagan ideal of man realising himself by happiness as opposed to the later and perhaps grander idea of man realising himself by suffering. I was, on that subject, entirely on the side of the ancients - the Greeks, I will say - the philosophers. (*Laughter.*)

(Holland, 2003: 75)

There is an interesting detail within this last comment. Wilde values the self-realisation through suffering higher, even though he advises the one through pleasure to the young. There seems to be a description of a development between the lines, which could also be found in Wilde's life, because the older he was, the more he realised himself through suffering - until, as will be seen later, the suffering will be of central importance to him as it is presented in *De profundis*.

In regard to this whole episode of the trials together with the next one about *Dorian Gray*, Dollimore points out, that this was one example of another phenomenon: the beginning of the connection between character and homosexuality and with this an emerging homosexual 'identity':

But we should remember that in the first of the three trials involving Wilde in 1895 he was cross-examined on his *Phrases and Philosophies*, the implication of opposing counsel being that they, along with *Dorian Gray*, were "calculated to subvert morality and encourage unnatural vice." There is a sense in which evidence cannot

get more material than this, and it remains so whatever our retrospective judgement about the crassness of the thinking behind such a view.

One of the many reasons why people thought as they did was to do with the perceived connections between Wilde's aesthetic transgression and his sexual transgression. It is not only that at this time the word "inversion" was being used for the first time to define a specific kind of deviant sexuality and deviant person (the two things now being indissociable), but also that, in producing the homosexual as a species of being rather than, as before, seeing sodomy as an aberration of behaviour, society now regarded homosexuality as rooted in a person's identity. (Dollimore: 59)

### 3.2.2.3 Dorian Gray

Since its first publication in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* in 1890 and more so after the expanded and revised book publication in 1891, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* had polarised the public. Many reviews were published, most of them negative. In a letter to the editor of the *Scots Observer* Wilde states: "I dislike newspaper controversies of any kind, and of the two hundred and sixteen criticisms of *Dorian Gray* that have passed from my library table into the wastepaper basket I have taken public notice of only three." (*Letters*: 447) McCormack, in his biography about John Gray, Wilde's lover after whom the protagonist was named, depicts that Wilde actually was pleased by the public reaction:

The first reaction - a wave of public denunciation - had washed over Wilde in a tide of vituperation. The book was spittle, slime, wound ooze, the seepage of decay. A leprous book. Corrupting the young. He [i.e. John Gray] had read the reviews when he returned from France, carefully saved for him by the Artist. For Oscar, it had all seemed like an inverted form of glory. He luxuriated in the public contempt; Oscar, in his element, lacerated the fools gladly. Brilliant paradox after paradox upset the public's simple desire to be good, to be serious. (McCormack: 50)

The public criticised that the book flouted determined values of the Victorian society by describing a decadent lifestyle that could not be tolerated:

With *Dorian Gray*, which seemed to smack too much of art for art's sake, the reviewers felt that Wilde violated the social function of art - that is, to present the normative values of society, to present the middle class. In exclusively representing the part of society that he did - idle aristocrats and romantic artists - Wilde offended

an ethic of industry and productivity. He seemed to expose himself as a presumptuous social climber who penetrated aristocratic circles with offensive ease. In addition, his indefatigable self-advertisement was simply not acceptable behaviour for a gentleman, much in the same way that his and Harry Wotton's lounging on sofas was not the acceptable carriage of gentlemen. The author's decadence lay in his unwillingness to capitulate to the image of the gentleman. (Gagnier: 65)

The main allegation, especially in the context of the trials, was that the novel was supposed to be homoerotic if not homosexual. Even though he later in the trial claimed that his motivation in changing passages within the story was based on artificial aspects, this was presumably also a reaction toward the public reaction:

Wilde responded to such charges not only by asserting the morality of the work, but by so revising the novel for book publication that the homosexuality of Basil Hallward is somewhat less obvious and the intended moral of the tale somewhat more so. He also, apparently in an attempt to undercut the moralistic assumptions of the reviewers, appended a "Preface," consisting of amoral aphorisms asserting the independence of art from questions of morality. (Summers, 1990: 43)

Carson was aware of these changes and therefore only referred to the first version, because it served his interpretation:

CARSON: I will suggest to you *Dorian Gray*. Is that open to the interpretation of being a sodomitical book?  
WILDE: Only to the brutes - only to the illiterate; perhaps I should say brutes and the illiterate.  
CARSON: An illiterate person reading *Dorian Gray* might consider it a sodomitical book?  
WILDE: The views of the Philistine on art could not be counted: they are incalculably stupid. You cannot ask me what misinterpretation of my work the ignorant, the illiterate, the foolish may put on it. It doesn't concern me. What concerns me in my art is my view and my feeling and why I made it; I don't care twopence what other people think about it.

(Holland, 2003: 81)

The question whether in *Dorian Gray* homosexuality is described or not, is very controversially discussed until today. If it is described at all, then only in a very subtle way:

Homosexuality is an important aspect of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and the novel deserves credit as a pioneering depiction of homosexual relationships in serious English fiction. But it is important to



emphasize that Wilde hints at homosexuality rather than expresses it directly. (Summers, 2002: 694)

One hint might have been the choice of the name<sup>23</sup>:

Homosexual readers would certainly have responded to the book's undercurrent of gay feeling, and may have found the very name "Dorian" suggestive of Greek homosexuality, since it was Dorian tribesmen who allegedly introduced homosexuality into Greece as part of their military regimen. (Summers, 1990: 45)

Wilde himself claimed that no concrete sin was described in the novel and the reader only would see what he wanted to; so one cannot argue that it explicitly is homosexuality. If this is to be understood as a paratext to the novel, one still has to keep in mind that each paratextual statement is driven by a special intention - a fact to which Genette points, too. Thus the question is why Wilde made this statement in the way he made it.

Alan Sinfield gives an alternative reading by quoting several scientists of the nineteenth century and their theory that masturbation would have an impact on a boy's appearance, because it is described that the picture of Dorian degenerates (cf. Sinfield: 101):

What the worm was to the corpse, his sins would be to the painted image on the canvas. They would mar its beauty, and eat away its grace. They would defile it, and make it shameful. (*Dorian Gray*: 115)

Because both vices - homosexuality and masturbation - could be subsumed under the term 'sodomy', this makes only a slight difference and perhaps it is best to leave the question open, what the actual sin is - if there is only one and not an accumulation of many - and come to a more abstract reading:

The evil in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* may encompass homosexual (as well as heterosexual) excesses, but it should by no means be identified with homosexuality per se. (Summers, 1990: 45)

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<sup>23</sup> An additional hint for insiders and close relations would have been the surname as well. But because John Gray had broken his relationship with Wilde already in 1883, he was not referred to in the trials; presumably Queensberry's detectives did not find out this relation. However, he gave the name to the protagonist: "As a playful comment on their friendship, which in his literary mode Oscar compared to that of Socrates and Phaedrus or to Shakespeare and Willie Hughes, Oscar began laughingly to call him "Dorian". With all the grandiloquent panoply of his Oxford education, Oscar explained that the name was given in honor of the strenuous love celebrated in Greek culture. It was a half-private joke, a nickname among the circles of artists among whom they moved." (McCormack: 44)

Not being explicitly homosexual, the relationship between Basil and Dorian has clearly a homoerotic undertone. The mirrored versions in the appendix of this paper show the differences between the two publications. The first version was read out by Carson during the trial. It is the scene, where Basil declares his love to Dorian and only in the earlier version the passage Carson refers to can be found. Wilde's defence does not seem to be plausible regarding this version, even though it might be correct for the revised one:

CARSON: Do you mean to say that that passage describes a natural feeling of one man towards another?  
WILDE: It describes the influence produced on an artist by a beautiful person.  
[...]  
CARSON: I want an answer to this simple question. Have you ever felt that feeling of adoring madly a beautiful male person many years younger than yourself?  
WILDE: I have never given adoration to anybody except myself.  
(*Loud laughter.*)  
(Holland, 2003: 89-91)

Because Carson went on pushing Wilde to a clear answer, Wilde made up a second explanation by invoking, as he will also do in his defence of 'the love that dare not speak its name' Shakespeare:

WILDE: [...] I have never adored any young man younger than myself or any person older than myself of any kind. I do not adore them. I either love a person or do not love them.  
CARSON: Then, you never had that feeling that you depict there?  
WILDE: No, it was borrowed from Shakespeare I regret to say.  
(*Laughter.*)  
[...]  
CARSON: [...] may I take it that you yourself have never experienced the sensation which you describe there as being the sensation of this artist towards Dorian Gray?  
WILDE: No, I varied it from Shakespeare's sonnets.  
(Holland, 2003: 92-93)

By this Wilde raises this relationship to a higher level and Basil thus "represents an idealized, Platonized homosexuality, linked to a long tradition of art and philosophy." (Summers, 1990: 45)

Another excerpt might be interesting to analyse because Wilde here contradicts his views depicted in *The Decay of Lying*:

CARSON: You don't think that one man could exercise any influence over another? I may take that as a general statement?  
WILDE: As a general statement, yes. I think influence is not a power that can be exercised at will by one person over another: I think it is quite impossible psychologically.  
[...]  
CARSON: Wasn't that the way in your own novel that Lord Henry Wotton corrupted Dorian Gray in the first instance?  
WILDE: Lord Henry Wotton - no - in the novel he doesn't corrupt him; you must remember that novels and life are different things.  
CARSON: It depends upon what you call corruption.  
WILDE: Yes, and what one calls life. In my novel there is a picture of changes. You are not to ask me if I believe they really happened; they are motives in fiction.  
(Holland, 2003: 103)

Following his statement in the mentioned essay strictly, he would have had to confess that people can be influenced. If people can even be manipulated by literary works, as claimed in his essay, the more so can be manipulated by other persons:

The diabolism of the painting may be dismissed as a gothic plot device, but Wilde's serious purpose in implicating Basil in the corruption of Dorian Gray is to underline the major theme of the work, the wickedness of using others. This theme is most clear in Dorian's heartless exploitation of others, and in the assumed, detached voyeurism of Henry, but it is involved as well in Basil's reduction of Dorian to "simply a motive in art" found "in the curves of certain lines, in the loveliness and subtleties of certain colours." Although Basil is by no means the villain of the piece, he too partakes of the objectification of others that the novel most vehemently condemns. (Summers, 1990: 48)

The second argument in Wilde's defence passage, where he claims that Lord Henry Wotton's influence was only a literary motive, is comparable to his description of the novel's moral, which he gave in a letter to the editor of the *Daily Chronicle* as a reaction to a review in 1890:

The real moral of the story is that all excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its punishment, and this moral is so far artistically and deliberately suppressed that it does not enunciate its law as a general principle, but realises itself purely in the lives of individuals, and so becomes simply a dramatic element in a work of art, and not the object of the work of art itself. (*Letters*: 435)

#### 3.2.2.4 The Letters

[? January 1893]

[Babbacombe Cliff]

My Own Boy, Your sonnet is quite lovely, and it is a marvel that those red rose-leaf lips of yours should have been made no less for music of song than for madness of kisses. Your slim gilt soul walks between passion and poetry. I know Hyacinthus, whom Apollo loved so madly, was you in Greek days.

Why are you alone in London, and when do you go to Salisbury? Do go there to cool your hands in the grey twilight of Gothic things, and come here whenever you like. It is a lovely place - it only lacks you; but go to Salisbury first Always with undying love, yours

OSCAR

(*Letters*: 544)

The addressee of this letter was Lord Alfred Douglas - regrettably. Being not the most careful person, it was Bosie's fault that this letter could be taken as evidence at all. Ellmann tells the story how this special letter came into public:

[I]n February 1893, Douglas passed on to Wilde a boy he had met, a seventeen-year-old named Alfred Wood. [...] Douglas went on seeing Wood, and gave him some cast-off clothes, carelessly failing to notice that there were letters from Wilde in the pockets. Wood decided to exploit this find to get money for a trip to America, and in April he sent a copy of one letter [i.e. presumably the quoted one] to Beerbohm Tree, then rehearsing *A Woman of No Importance*, and waited for Wilde outside the stage door. Wilde, alerted by Tree, refused to give Wood anything, saying that if Wood could - as he pretended - get £60 for one of the letters, he should take advantage of this price, unusual for a prose piece of this length. Wood and two confederates eventually decided to give the letters to Wilde, except for the Hyacinth letter, and Wilde obligingly gave him £25 then and £5 a day later. After this transaction Wood went to America for a year. (Ellmann: 367)

Because of this 'accident' the letter was no longer private and finally reached Carson's hands, who then added it to his evidence:

WILDE: Yes, I think it was a beautiful letter. If you ask me whether it is proper, you might as well ask me whether *King Lear* is proper, or a sonnet of Shakespeare is proper. It was a beautiful letter. It was not concerned with - the letter was not written - with the object of writing propriety; it was written with the object of making a beautiful thing.

CARSON: But apart from art?

WILDE: Ah! I cannot do that.

CARSON: But apart from art?

WILDE: I cannot answer any question apart from art.

CARSON: Suppose a man, now, who was not an artist had written this letter to a handsome young man, as I believe Lord Alfred Douglas is?

WILDE: Yes.

CARSON: Some twenty years younger than himself - would you say that it was a proper and natural kind of letter to write to him?

WILDE: A man who was not an artist could never have written that letter. (*Laughter.*)

(Holland, 2003: 105)

Again Wilde argues from an artificial point of view and later claims this letter, actually, to be a piece of art. In *The Decay of Lying* Wilde had stated that: "If a man is sufficiently unimaginative to produce evidence in support of a lie, he might just as well speak the truth." (*DoL*: 59) Being highly creative, he himself was able to produce evidence in support of a lie as the sequel of the 'Hyacinth letter story' shows:

Wilde and Douglas told [Pierre] Louÿs that they were worried about the possibility of blackmail over the Hyacinth letter which Wilde had written to Douglas, still in the hands of Alfred Wood. So that it might be given the status of a work of art, Louÿs obligingly prepared a version of it in French, and the result was published in the *Spirit Lamp*, Douglas's Oxford magazine, on 4 May 1893, with an allusion to Wilde's play, as 'a Sonnet. A letter written in prose poetry by M. Oscar Wilde to a friend, and translated into rhymed poetry by a poet of no importance.' (Ellmann: 370-371)

Thus, he gave the answer - and even went beyond - in real life to the question presented in *The Portrait of W. H.*: "'What would you say about a young man who had a strange theory about a certain work of art, believed in his theory, and committed a forgery in order to prove it?'" (*Portrait*: 49)

Another marginal incident that arose during the examination on the letters, was Carson's uncovering as one of "the intelligent person[s] whose reminiscences are always based upon memory, whose statements are invariably limited by probability, and who [are] at any time liable to be corroborated by the merest Philistine who happens to be present" (*DoL*: 71) that Wilde had often criticised:

CARSON: That is a beautiful phrase too?

WILDE: Not when you read it, Mr Carson. When I wrote it, it was beautiful. You read it very badly.

CARSON: I don't profess to be an artist, Mr Wilde.  
 WILDE: Then, don't read it to me.  
 CARSON: And if you will allow me to say so, sometimes, when I  
 hear you give evidence I am glad I am not.  
 (Holland, 2003: 106)

### 3.2.2.5 Two Loves

*Two Loves*, a poem of Lord Alfred Douglas, was first published in the Oxford undergraduate magazine *The Chameleon*. Consisting of many pastoral elements, it is set in a paradisiacal garden. The first person voice towards the ending describes how two young men – one rather happily minded, the other more in a sad mood – approach. The young man then asks the sad one who he is and so the poem ends with the lines:

"[...] What is thy name?" He said, "My name is Love."  
 Then straight the first did turn himself to me  
 And cried, "He lieth, for his name is Shame,  
 But I am Love, and I was wont to be  
 Alone in this fair garden, till he came  
 Unasked by night; I am true Love, I fill  
 The hearts of boy and girl with mutual flame."  
 Then sighing said the other, "Have thy will,  
 I am the Love that dare not speak its name<sup>24</sup>."  
 (quoted in Harris: 551)

Even though he had been cross-examined by Carson within the Queensberry trial on this poem, it was not until the first criminal trial against himself, that Oscar Wilde made his presumably most quoted statement of his trial utterances. Having beforehand suspected the two loves to be 'natural' and 'unnatural' love, the prosecutor, Charles Gill, now wanted to know, what 'the love that dare not speak its name' was. (cf. Hyde: 235-236) Wilde defined this love in a marvellous way invoking a homosexually idealistic tradition from the ancient Greeks to the Renaissance:

"The Love that dare not speak its name" in this century is such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan<sup>25</sup>, such as Plato made the very basis of his

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<sup>24</sup> Douglas's expression is a modification of the metaphor used in the (religious) moral discourse of the preceding centuries, where sodomy often had been called 'the unnameable sin'.

<sup>25</sup> David laments Jonathan's death saying: "I am distressed for thee, my brother Jonathan: very pleasant hast thou been unto me: thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women." (2 Sam. 1:26, King James Version)

philosophy<sup>26</sup>, and such as you find in the sonnets of Michelangelo<sup>27</sup> and Shakespeare. It is that deep, spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect. It dictates and pervades great works of art like those of Shakespeare and Michelangelo, and those two letters of mine, such as they are. It is in this century misunderstood, so much misunderstood that it may be described as the "Love that dare not speak its name," and on account of it I am placed where I am now. It is beautiful, it is fine, it is the noblest form of affection. There is nothing unnatural about it. It is intellectual, and it repeatedly exists between an elder and a younger man, when the elder man has intellect, and the younger man has all the joy, hope and glamour of life before him. That it should be so the world does not understand. The world mocks at it and sometimes puts one in the pillory for it. (Loud applause, mingled with some hisses.) (Hyde: 236)

Hyde observes that this highly emotional speech and the outrage it provoked, which was suppressed by the judge immediately, surely had a strong impression on the jury and presumably was one of the main factors leading to the disagreement on the verdict. (cf. Hyde: 73-74)

The reference made to Shakespeare does not surprise nowadays as "openly addressing homoerotic themes when discussing Shakespeare's Sonnets<sup>28</sup> is now perfectly acceptable, indeed unavoidable." (Halpern: 3) Even though theories basing on such an assumption already existed at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this approach was highly controversial - at least morally. In 1889 Wilde had already touched the matter in a piece of short fiction<sup>29</sup>, namely "The Portrait of W.H.", which connects Shakespeare to homoeroticism comparably and therefore

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<sup>26</sup> By invoking Plato, Wilde underlines the innocence of such relationships. Paradoxically, following the writings of Plato strictly, he would be in the same situation as he is; he would be prosecuted because of consummation of homosexuality: "Plato's *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* are the most brilliant and best known writings on Greek homosexuality to come down to us from the classical era. Plato records with dramatic vividness informal scenes where flirtations take place, lighthearted banter is exchanged, and current attitudes to male love are seriously discussed or implicitly revealed. Plato shares the popular enthusiasm for these affairs as the source of inspiring emotional bonds while arguing that they should remain unconsummated. The *Symposium* reveals popular Greek attitudes, the *Phaedrus* presents an ultra-romantic ideal of (chaste) male love, and a late work, the *Laws*, argues for punitive measures against physical acts." (Summers, 2002: 322)

<sup>27</sup> The *Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage* claims the sonnets Wilde refers to, to be the finest depictions of homoeroticism until the English Renaissance: "Indeed, not until SHAKESPEARE would another sonneteer represent same-sex desire with such sensuous complexity, emotional resonance, and linguistic artfulness." (Summers, 2002: 448)

<sup>28</sup> Halpern analyses this relation in *Shakespeare's Perfume*. Even though there are some very convincing arguments his approach sometimes oversteps the mark being too psychoanalytic and sometimes it seems as if he forces a homosexual reading at all costs.

<sup>29</sup> Either one can understand it as a short story or as an essay. In some editions it is placed as the first, in others as the latter.

"deserves enormous credit for bravery in even broaching gay themes at a time when it was dangerous to do so." (Summers, 1990: 33) One has to keep in mind that Labouchere's amendment had passed Parliament only four years earlier.

In "The Portrait of W. H." the narrator and his friend Erskine talk about the question, if it was acceptable that forgery is used to prove a theory about a work of art. Erskine then tells about an old schoolmate, Cyril, who had developed a theory, which he thought to be totally convincing by internal argumentation, that Shakespeare's sonnets were dedicated to a boy-actor named Willie Hughes. First Erskine had believed this theory, but after becoming more doubtful, he demands an external proof for this theory and thus Cyril has a portrait of Willie Hughes painted by a dubious artist, which he then shows Erskine in order to convince him. After Erskine finds out the forgery and confronts Cyril with this, the latter commits suicide.

The narrator, who was at first only fascinated by the portrait, now is also caught by Cyril's theory and leaves Erskine with the promise to find unequivocal evidence for it. He redevelops and extends the theory and afterwards writes it down in a letter to Erskine. Having written it down and sent the letter to his friend, he begins to doubt this theory again and encounters Erskine once more with the intention to withdraw what he stated in the letter.

But now Erskine is addicted to the theory and in return promises that he will find a proof for it. Some years later, the narrator gets a letter of Erskine from the Continent, admitting that he failed in doing so and was going to commit suicide. The narrator immediately travels to his old friend in order to prevent another death related to the theory. When he meets Erskine's mother and physician, he is told that Erskine did not kill himself but died of consumption.



Within the Queensberry trial, Wilde had already been examined on this story by Carson:

CARSON: I believe you have written an article pointing out that Shakespeare's sonnets were practically sodomitical.

WILDE: On the contrary, Mr Carson, I wrote an article to prove that they were not so.

CARSON: You did write an article to prove that they were not sodomitical?

WILDE: Yes, the statement had been made against Shakespeare by Hallam, the historian, and by others. I wrote an article to prove that they were not so, and I consider I have proved it.

(Holland, 2003: 93)

By claiming this, Wilde is telling the truth inasmuch the story does not definitely state that the sonnets had a homosexual content, rather he symbolises that believing in this theory - if not generally then at least in the one made up by Cyril - will have fatal consequences. Ironically another analogy to his characters: Wilde in being supposed to follow this theory would have to stand serious consequences as well. But the story is primarily not dealing with the topic of the sonnets being homoerotic or not - it seems to be even irrelevant if they were; more precisely it deals with questions concerning literary criticism: "The *Portrait* brilliantly illustrates the origin, the propagation, and the fatal effects of literary theory within a dense field of desire." (Halpern: 33)

The story is about the core of interpretation and can be related to a statement Wilde made when he was asked, if the sins of *Dorian Gray* may have been sodomy, by Carson within the Queensberry trial: "That is according to the temper of each one who reads the book; he who has found the sin has brought it." (Holland, 2003: 78) This is exactly what the narrator implicitly expresses by indoctrinating Erskine: "If we grant that there was in Shakespeare's company a young actor of the name of Willie Hughes, it is not difficult to make him the object of the Sonnets." (*Portrait*: 76) He, as Cyril before him, even rearranges the Sonnets in order to make a sense out

of it: "If the theory does not correspond to the Sonnets, the Sonnets must be reordered so that they support the theory." (Halpern: 44)

By the complex structure of the story and the constant changes of the characters' interpretations, Wilde shows implicitly that it is completely irrelevant, if he himself believed in this theory, nor that it is relevant if one of the characters or any antedating theoretician did so; important is only what the reader makes out of it by reading something into the story as well as the theory presented within. This is, ironically, also the core problem of the literary part of the trials: It is not important what Wilde wrote or said, it is only of interest how it is understood and interpreted, which is expressed in Carson's threat, which serves as the title of this paper: "I will take your answer one way or the other." (Holland, 2003: 98)

What the defending speech about *Two Loves* and the story have in common, is a diachronic view on a transmitted homosexual 'tradition'. What is true for the story could also be said about the speech: "It places homosexuality in a distant past but also discloses a continuity of homosexual feeling that links the past to the present. [It] is at once a literary speculation, a meditation on idealized homosexuality, and a foiled coming-out story." (Summers, 1990: 35)

Summers concludes his analysis stating that "'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.' both defends homosexuality and regretfully - perhaps prophetically - rejects it." (Summers, 1990: 42) This mirrors his evaluation of the speech, which is "largely untrue and certainly misleading, [and] designed to deny the physical expression of his homosexuality rather than to defend it." (Summers, 2002: 692) Thus, in both cases Wilde tries to substitute the physical consummation by some sublimated, idealistic conception of homosexuality, which

might be fitting in regard to - at least the later periods of his relationships to - Robert Ross, André Gide or even Lord Alfred Douglas, but it definitely could not explain his attitude towards young men like Parker, Wood or Atkins.

### 3.2.3 Facts but Fiction - The Real Evidence

This discrepancy becomes evident, when looking at the examinations on the 'hard facts' against Wilde. Whereas he was eloquent and witty throughout the literary parts of the trials, he lost ground as soon as he was confronted with the evidence given proving his underworld love affairs:

We do not need to assume that Wilde was hypocritical about this; he may well have hoped to find an ideal love among the boys he was addressing. But the prosecution made his assignations and financial transactions sound squalid, and represented the boys either as corrupted by Wilde, or as so corrupt already that no decent person would associate with them. It all seemed quite contrary to the leisure-class arrogance and aesthetic elegance that Wilde had been affecting. (Sinfield: 121)

Even though Sinfield tries to find an apology for him, one gets the impression that Wilde had his back to the wall. The following passage shows the turning point of the first trial, when Wilde obviously lost his string of argumentation and Carson was able to make a serious point against Wilde during the cross-examination on Grainger:

CARSON: Did you ever kiss him?  
WILDE: Oh, no, never in my life; he was a peculiarly plain boy.  
CARSON: He was what?  
WILDE: I said I thought him unfortunately - his appearance was so very unfortunately - very ugly - I mean - I pitied him for it.  
CARSON: Very ugly?  
WILDE: Yes.  
CARSON: Do you say that in support of your statement that you never kissed him?  
WILDE: No, I don't; it is like asking me if I kissed a doorpost; it is childish.  
CARSON: Didn't you give me as the reason that you never kissed him that he was too ugly?  
WILDE: (*warmly*): No.  
CARSON: Why did you mention his ugliness?  
WILDE: No, I said the question seemed to me like - your asking me whether I ever had him to dinner, and then whether I

had kissed him - seemed to me merely an intentional insult on your part, which I have been going through the whole of this morning.

CARSON: Because he was ugly?

WILDE: No.

CARSON: Why did you mention the ugliness? I have to ask these questions.

WILDE: I say it is ridiculous to imagine that any such thing would possibly have occurred under any circumstances.

CARSON: Why did you mention his ugliness?

WILDE: For that reason. If you asked me if I had ever kissed a doorpost, I should say, 'No! Ridiculous! I shouldn't like to kiss a doorpost.' Am I to be cross-examined on why I shouldn't like to kiss a doorpost? The questions are grotesque.

CARSON: Why did you mention the boy's ugliness?

WILDE: I mentioned it perhaps because you stung me by an insolent question.

CARSON: Because I stung you by an insolent question?

WILDE: Yes, you stung me by an insolent question; you make me irritable.

CARSON: Did you say the boy was ugly, because I stung you by an insolent question?

WILDE: Pardon me, you sting me, insult me and try to unnerve me in every way. At times one says flippantly when one should speak more seriously, I admit that, I admit it - I cannot help it. That is what you are doing to me.

CARSON: You said it flippantly? You mentioned his ugliness flippantly; that is what you wish to convey now?

WILDE: Oh, don't say what I wish to convey. I have given you my answer.

CARSON: Is that it, that that was a flippant answer?

WILDE: Oh, it was a flippant answer, yes; I will say it was certainly a flippant answer.

(Holland, 2003: 207-209)

When reading this passage, one gets embarrassed and a feeling of pity arises. Hyde refers to this scene as the "climax to the cross-examination" (Hyde: 52) and states that "[t]he damage was done; and the foolish slip, which caused it, could not be covered up." (Hyde: 52) McCormack finds an even harsher formulation: "The trap had been sprung. Wilde is ensnared by one final, fatal witticism. With that sentence he had sentenced himself." (McCormack: 175)

As names, facts and situations were presented one after another, the situation got worse for Wilde. Even though many of the audience, including many that knew Wilde, could not believe the things they heard and that was even the case throughout the second trial, on which Sinfield comments:

This was despite the fact that young men were testifying, with circumstantial detail, that they had had sexual relations with Wilde - Harris thought they had been paid to perjure themselves. Even Queensberry, Harris deduces (p. 231), did not initially believe the same-sex allegations: he was surprised by the evidence that was offered to him. (Sinfield: 1)

But it was not only the homosexual component of this evidence that put pressure on Wilde but also the fact that most of the boys were of lower social standing. This in itself was against Victorian morality, because 'The Empire' had always been based on class differentiation. Wilde denied social distinctions and by this indirectly criticised Victorian society - as he directly had done in *The Soul of Man under Socialism*. During the Queensberry trial he made several statements that underlined his wilful ignorance:

WILDE: I don't care about different social position.  
CARSON: You don't care?  
WILDE: Not about different social position. If anybody interests me or is in trouble and I have been asked to help him in any way, what is the use of putting on airs about one's own social position? It is childish.

(Holland, 2003: 119)

CARSON: Was he [i.e. Charles Parker] a gentleman's servant out of employment?

WILDE: I have no knowledge of that at all.

[...]

CARSON: Did you never hear that?

WILDE: I never heard it, nor should I have minded. I don't care twopence about people's social position.

(Holland, 2003: 164)

CARSON: Did you know that one of them was a gentleman's valet and the other was a gentleman's groom? [i.e. Charles and William Parker]

WILDE: I didn't know it, nor should I have cared.

CARSON: Nor should you have cared?

WILDE: No, I don't think twopence for social position; if I like them, I like them. It is a snobbish and vulgar thing to do.

(Holland, 2003: 166)

CARSON: Really? What I would like to ask you is this: what was there in common between you and this young man [i.e. Charles Parker] of this class?

WILDE: Well, I will tell you, Mr Carson, I delight in the society of people much younger than myself. [...] I recognise no social distinctions at all of any kind and to me youth - the mere fact of youth - is so wonderful that I would sooner talk to a young man half an hour than even be, well, cross-examined in court. (*Laughter.*)

(Holland, 2003: 174-175)

The last explanation shows again the underlying concept of beauty's primacy to which all other values have to be subordinate. Moreover, "Wilde consciously constructed and marketed himself as a luminal figure within British class relations, straddling the lines between nobility, aristocracy, middle-class, and - in his sexual encounters - working class." (Cohen: 70) With regard to *Dorian Gray*, Cohen makes a statement that easily can be transferred to this behaviour, because it is an:

intersection of Victorian class and gender ideologies from which Wilde's status as the paradigmatic "homosexual" would emerge. For, in contrast to the "manly" middle-class male, Wilde would come to represent - through his writings and his trials - the "unmanly" social climber who threatened to upset the certainty of bourgeois categories. (Sinfield: 121)

Thus, by his homosexuality and his wilful ignorance of the social class system, Wilde represents - perhaps at least for the middle-class jury - exactly the threat that Queensberry intended to invoke, in order to have a cause that forced his interaction to protect his innocent son.

In combination with Wilde's growing lack of eloquence and repartee, and even more important Carson's threat to call the young men into the box, it is understandable that Clarke tried to put on the emergency brake - even though it was in vain because the subsequent trials and his imprisonment could not be avoided then.

#### 3.2.4 Review of a Performance - De Profundis

As an instance of his fortitude while serving his sentence, surely no better example can be given of his unbreakable spirit than the brilliant epigram he made to a warder, when standing handcuffed to two felons in the pouring rain on a suburban railway station. It was: 'Sir, if this is the way Queen Victoria treats her convicts, she doesn't deserve to have any.' (Seymour Hicks quoted in Mikhail: 286)

After the last trial, Wilde and Taylor were first taken to Newgate Prison, where their imprisonment was prepared and afterwards brought to Holloway. (cf. Ellmann: 450) "During the

week of 9 June Wilde was moved to Pentonville, the prison for convicted prisoners, as Holloway was for unconvicted ones." (Ellmann: 451) There he stayed about a month and then was transferred to Wandsworth on July 4<sup>th</sup> and finally to Reading Gaol on November 21<sup>st</sup> 1895, where he stayed until his release. (cf. Ellmann: 456, 465)

There he wrote towards the end of his imprisonment a letter to Lord Alfred Douglas, known as *De Profundis*<sup>3031</sup>, from January to March 1897:

*De profundis* is a kind of dramatic monologue, which constantly questions and takes into account the silent recipient's supposed responses. Given the place where it was written, Wilde might have been expected to confess his guilt. Instead he refuses to admit that his past conduct with young men was guilty, and declares that the laws by which he was condemned were unjust. (Ellmann: 482)

The letter could be understood as a biography about Lord Alfred, as well as an autobiography, but also as a critique on Victorian society in general as well as prison conditions especially. Though, Wilde's intention seems to be directing the criticism towards Lord Alfred:

I have no doubt that in this letter in which I have to write of your life and of mine, of the past and of the future, of sweet things changed to bitterness and of bitter things that may be turned into joy, there will be much that will wound your vanity to the quick. (Letters: 684)

Written in prison, the letter is often contradictory to the facts. In regard to the reliability of the text, however, Summers defends it:

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<sup>30</sup> Wilde originally intended it to be named *In Carcere et Vinculis*, but Ross entitled it *De profundis*. As Holland shows in his detailed footnote on the letter, Ross made a typescript copy of it, which was neither accurate nor complete, and in 1905 published parts of it under the known title. He gave the original manuscript to the British Museum in 1909 on the condition that it should not be read by anyone for the next 50 years. Vyvyan Holland, Oscar Wilde's son, then published it again in 1949 on the basis of the typescript version. In 2000 a facsimile version of the original manuscript was published by the British Library, which was then published by Merlin Holland, Wilde's grandson, and Rupert Hart-Davis in *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*. (cf. Letters: 683, footnote 1)

<sup>31</sup> Summers points out that both titles were well chosen ones: "The title [i.e. *De Profundis*], which echoes Psalm 130, is a good one, for it captures the complex tone of the work, a combination of prophetic utterances forged in the crucible of suffering and self-consciously daring wit that approaches campy self-mockery. But the title Wilde himself suggested for the letter, *Epistola: in Carcere et Vinculis*, is equally telling, for it calls specific attention to the conditions under which the letter was written." (Summers, 1990: 52-53)

[T]he charges of inaccuracy are more than a little beside the point, since *De Profundis* - an artistic construct written under horribly difficult conditions - should be judged not on the basis of factual accuracy but on the success of its creation of a symbolic character, the martyred artist. (Summers, 1990: 52)

This symbolic character finds its expression mainly in the second half of the text, where Wilde often writes about Christianity and compares himself to Christ:

The most daring aspect of *De Profundis* is Wilde's simultaneous depictions of Christ as his image and himself in Christ's image. Not only has he been betrayed and humiliated as Christ was - like Christ, he is betrayed by a false friend's kiss, and he accuses Douglas and his father of throwing "dice for my soul" - but he also depicts himself as suffering for the sins of others, namely Douglas and his family. [...] He recruits Christ as his ally in an assault on his persecutors - those moralists who thirsted for his blood. (Summers, 1990: 55)

The basis on which he founds these depictions is found earlier in the text, when he accuses Douglas of being responsible for his fate - on the one hand because of the Hyacinth letter and on the other because he convinced him to write the *Phrases and Philosophies*. But merged with the accusations is the general undertone of critique towards a society that is unable - either because being too uneducated or too hypocritical - to understand him as he is:

The letter is like a passage from one of Shakespeare's sonnets, transposed into a minor key. It can only be understood by those who have read the *Symposium* of Plato, or caught the spirit of a certain grave mood made beautiful for us in Greek marbles. [...] Look at the history of that letter! It passes from you into the hands of a loathsome companion: from him to a gang of blackmailers: copies of it are sent about London to my friends, and to the manager of the theatre where my work is being performed: every construction but the right one is put on it: Society is thrilled with the absurd rumours that I have had to pay a huge sum of money for having written an infamous letter to you: this forms the basis of your father's worst attack: I produce the original letter myself in Court to show what it really is: it is denounced by your father's Counsel as a revolting and insidious attempt to corrupt Innocence: ultimately it forms part of a criminal charge: the Crown takes it up: the Judge sums up on it with little learning and much morality: I go to prison for it at last. That is the result of writing you a charming letter. [...] One day you come to me and ask me, as a personal favour to you, to write something for an Oxford undergraduate magazine, about to be started by some friends of yours, whom I had never heard of in all my life, and knew nothing at all about. To please you - what did I not do always to please you? - I sent him a page of paradoxes destined originally for the *Saturday Review*. A few months later I find myself standing in the dock of old Bailey on account of the character of the



magazine. It forms part of the Crown charge against me. I am called upon to defend your friend's prose and your own verse. The former I cannot palliate; the latter I, loyal to the bitter extreme, to your youthful literature as to your youthful life, do very strongly defend, and will not hear of your being a writer of indecencies. But I go to prison, all the same, for your friend's undergraduate magazine, and 'the Love that dares not tell its name'. (*Letters*: 702-703)

Even though this sounds like an unfair accusation that derives from bitter disappointment and frustration and is not accurate regarding the causal relations, there is something true within its core proposition: A great share of Wilde's charges was influenced if not committed by Douglas. Thus, it is understandable that Wilde comes to the conclusion that:

[o]f course there are many things of which I was convicted that I had not done, but then there are many things of which I was convicted that I had done, and a still greater number of things in my life for which I was never indicted at all. (*Letters*: 733)

But besides Douglas, he also blames the system itself for being unfair:

Reason does not help me. It tells me that the laws under which I am convicted are wrong and unjust laws, and the system under which I have suffered a wrong and unjust system. (*Letters*: 732)

Nevertheless, it is this suffering that he now values much more than in his remarks at the trial or in *The Decay of Lying*:

Deserted by Douglas, humiliated by a vengeful public, branded and cast out from society, he describes his life as a veritable "Symphony of Sorrow." But the supreme theme of the work is the meaningfulness of suffering. (*Letters*: 684)

Through his suffering a whole new position opens up for Wilde from which he can look upon his former life as well as past thoughts. He even finds in it a basis for art:

Sorrow, then, and all that it teaches one, is my new world. I used to live entirely for pleasure. I shunned sorrow and suffering of every kind. I hated both. I resolved to ignore them as far as possible, to treat them, that is to say, as modes of imperfection. They were not part of my scheme of life. They had no place in my philosophy. [...] I now see that sorrow, being the supreme emotion of which man is capable, is at once the type and test of all great Art. What the artist is always looking for is that mode of existence in which soul and body are one and indivisible: in which the outward is expressive of the inward: in which form reveals. [...] Truth in Art is the unity of a thing with itself: the outward rendered expressive of the inward: the soul made incarnate: the body instinct with spirit. For

this reason there is no truth comparable to Sorrow. There are times when Sorrow seems to me to be the only truth. Other things may be illusions of the eye or the appetite, made to blind the one and cloy the other, but out of Sorrow have the worlds been built, and at the birth of a child or a star there is pain. (*Letters*: 736-737)

And he ends up in the conclusion: "Pleasure for the beautiful body, but Pain for the beautiful Soul." (*Letters*: 738) Perhaps this altered view on life has served as a kind of self-liberation<sup>32</sup>, so that it became true, what he had almost prophetically written in *The Soul of Man under Socialism*: "After all, even in prison, a man can be free. His soul can be free. His personality can be untroubled. He can be at peace." (*SoMuS*: 29)

On May 19<sup>th</sup> 1897, Wilde completed his sentence officially and was released. More Adey and Stewart Headlam took him from prison:

They avoided the press and drove him to Headlam's house, where Wilde changed his clothes and had his first cup of coffee in two years. He talked of Dante. [...] The Leversons arrived, and were shown into the drawing room. They felt ill at ease, but Wilde came in, as Ada Leverson recalled, 'with the dignity of a king returning from exile. He came in talking, laughing, smoking a cigarette, with waved hair and a flower in his buttonhole, and he looked markedly better, slighter, and younger than he had two years previously.' He greeted Ada Leverson by saying, 'Sphinx, how marvellous of you to know exactly the right hat to wear at seven o' clock in the morning to meet a friend who has been away! You can't have got up, you must have sat up.' (Ellmann: 495)

It seems that Wilde had regained his former self and his wit, in *De Profundis* he had still written about his prison life:

I myself, at that time, had no name at all. In the great prison where I was then incarcerated I was merely the figure and letter of a little cell in a long gallery, one of a thousand lifeless numbers, as of a thousand lifeless lives. (Sinfield: 121)

But after having been released from prison Wilde lived on the Continent under the name of Sebastian Melmouth until he died

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<sup>32</sup> This is also true in regard to his homosexuality: "In *De Profundis*, Wilde defends his homosexuality [...] obliquely but strongly, and the work deserves a prominent place in the literature of homosexual apologies. Wilde's frank admission of his homosexuality as "a fact about me" translates his sexual identity into an element of the new self-knowledge he has gained in the crucible of suffering and one that he will not willingly deny or surrender." (Summers, 2002: 695)

in 1900 in Paris<sup>33</sup>. *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* was published 1898, the author being "C. 3.3.":

[H]e assumed, for the first time in his life, a quasi-anonymous identity: first as the prison designation "C. 3.3.," then as "Sebastian Melmouth," a reference to Saint Sebastian (a gay icon) and to *Melmouth the Wanderer* (1820), a novel written by Charles Maturin, his maternal great-uncle." (Waldrep: 24)

One could argue - and some of his contemporaries do so - that Wilde was no longer himself and thus no longer existed. In regard to the 'Oscar Wilde' presented in this paper - meaning 'the artwork Oscar Wilde' as it was set up by 'the man Oscar Wilde' - this is definitely true. Life had ceased to imitate art.

### 3.3 Placing the Transcripts in his Work

After an analytic and sometimes even interpretative overview regarding the transcripts as well as Wilde's *Œuvre* has been given, the question is now, how to place the transcripts in the context of his work. It is obvious that the information presented can be helpful when following a new historicist approach and it is easy to think of *De Profundis* as a paratextual element in Genettean terms - even when strictly sticking to the definition. How the transcripts can be understood as parts of the paratext has still to be shown. But Genette himself takes non-literary influences into account when speaking of paratexts:

[S]o etwa fungieren für die meisten Leser der *Recherche* zwei biographische Fakten, nämlich die halbjüdische Abstammung Prousts und seine Homosexualität, unweigerlich als Paratext zu jenen Seiten seines Werkes, die sich mit diesen beiden Themen befassen. Ich sage nicht, daß man das wissen muss: Ich sage nur, daß diejenigen, die davon wissen, nicht so lesen wie diejenigen, die nicht davon wissen, und daß uns diejenigen zum Narren halten, die diesen Unterschied leugnen. (Genette: 15)

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<sup>33</sup> Gagnier summarises his last years very harshly, when writing: "He could go on to freedom in Paris amid the street boys and acrobats, to acknowledge his first audience of peers: the rebels, criminals, and outcasts who had always known that a society without romance was a bleak room in which one sat with serious face telling serious lies to a bald man." (Gagnier, 1986: 180)

Thus, it is more important that the paratext changes interpretation than that it is text itself. So the structure of paratexts is comparable to a cloud expiring into an increasingly slight mist. If Proust's Jewish background and his homosexuality is part of the paratext, one can widen the definition so that also the content of the trial transcripts can be understood as paratextual - this is then not only reduced to the comments Wilde made to his texts but also to the facts presented as well - as long as it is connected to the literary evidence - as the statements of Carson in the first trial and the prosecution in the subsequent ones.

Taking this as a starting point, a lot of new, interesting questions are opened up - detailed ones and general ones alike: How is *The Portrait of W.H.* to be interpreted - as an essay about homosexuality in Shakespeare's sonnets (as it can be understood if only the text is looked upon) or as an essay against this view (as Wilde claimed it to be during the trials)? To what extent does Wilde's homosexuality pervade his literature? How exactly does the development of Wilde himself - in his life and his work - take place, meaning his progress from dandy to aesthete to the decadent artist and finally to an 'enlightened aesthete'? Moreover, in which way could the trials in combination with the following period in prison be seen as a catharsis - especially regarding Wilde's philosophy of life and art? How is Wilde's conception of 'truth' to be interpreted with the background of the trials, where he told much but seldom the truth?

Being limited, this paper cannot answer these questions sufficiently, but it can serve as a basis for further research. To take into account the trial transcripts by extending Genette's paratext, could be a fruitful approach towards interpretation of Wilde's work and understanding the

motives that lead him throughout his life. Furthermore the trials and his precedent self-invention which was revealed in court can help to explain why Wilde's legacy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and especially his impact on Modernism could become that relevant.

#### **4 Conclusion**

The form of government that is most suitable to the artist is no government at all. Authority over him and his art is ridiculous.  
(*SoMuS*: 46)

If this was the case, Wilde perhaps would have given a completely different literature to posterity. Even though he already was quite frank and modern, there had been still limitations in some way.

This paper has given a broad context in which Wilde's work has to be integrated. Many factors seem to have shaped the way Wilde wrote: legal and social ones as well as biographical and personal ones. When looking back on Wilde's work retrospectively, one has to be careful, because today's conceptions of terms like 'homosexuality' or 'modernism' is quite different to the thinking of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. So it was always important throughout this paper to listen to what the voices of this time said.

The material for analysis seems to be infinite, so when discussing it, one has to concentrate on a small excerpt. By focussing on the trial transcripts on the one hand and selected primary literature on the other, one will see that there is a direct connection between them and the former helps to get access to the latter.

Coming back to its theoretical paradigm, this paper obviously faces the same problems that are identified in regard to New Historicism:

There is always something further to pursue, always some extra trace, always some leftover, even in the most satisfyingly tight and

coherent argument. Moreover, works that are at first adduced only in order to illuminate a particular cultural object develop an odd tendency to insist upon themselves as fascinating interpretive enigmas. (Gallagher/Greenblatt: 15)

However, the result of this paper is that by understanding the trials as a paratextual element and taking them into account when speaking about Wilde's work, one gets deeper access to Wildean literature as well of its context.

Regarding Wilde's performance during the Queensberry trial, Hyde narrates:

His spontaneous quips were every bit as good as those he had put into the mouths of the characters in *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Soon the Court rocked with laughter. This was indeed as good as a play – and a Wilde play at that! (Hyde: 50)

Thus, we should understand the trials as what they are: The only non-fiction drama of Oscar Wilde.<sup>34</sup>

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## 5 Appendix: Quotation from Dorian Gray

The following quotation mirrors the two versions of the scene, where Basil reveals his love to Dorian. The first version, published in *Lippincott's* (left), the second published in the book (right):

'[...]Wait till you hear what I have to say.

It is true that I have worshipped you with far more romance of feeling than a man usually gives to a friend. Somehow, I had never loved a woman. I suppose I never had time. Perhaps, as Harry says, a really *grande passion* is the privilege of those who have nothing to do, and that is the use of the idle classes in a country. Well,

from the moment I met you, your personality had the most extraordinary influence over me.

I quite admit that I adored you madly, extravagantly, absurdly. I was

I was dominated, soul, brain, and power, by you. You became to me the visible incarnation of that unseen ideal whose memory haunts us artists like an exquisite dream. I worshipped you. I grew

jealous of every one to whom you spoke. I wanted to have you all to myself. I was only happy when I was with you.

When I was away from you,

When you were away from me

you were still present in my art....

It was all wrong and foolish. It is all wrong and foolish still.

Of course I never let you know anything about this. It would have been impossible. You would not have understood it.

I did not understand it myself. One day

I hardly understood it myself. I only knew that I had seen perfection face to face, and that the world had become wonderful to my eyes - too wonderful, perhaps, for in such mad worships there is peril, the peril of losing them, no

less than the peril of keeping them.... Weeks and weeks went on, and I grew more and more absorbed in you. Then came a new development. I had drawn you as Paris in dainty armour, and as Adonis with huntsman's cloak and polished boar-spear. Crowned with heavy lotus-blossoms you had sat on the prow of Adrian's barge, gazing across the green turbid Nile. You had leant over the still pool of some Greek woodland, and seen in the water's silent silver the marvel of your own face. And it had all been what art should be, unconscious, ideal, and remote. One day, a fatal day I sometimes think,

I determined to paint a wonderful portrait of you.

It was to have been my masterpiece. It is my masterpiece. But

as you actually are, not in the costume of dead ages, but in your own dress and in your own time. Whether it was the Realism of the method, or the mere wonder of your own personality, thus directly presented to me without mist or veil, I cannot tell. But I know that

as I worked at it, every flake and film of colour seemed to me to reveal my secret. I grew afraid that

the world

others

would know of my idolatry. I felt, Dorian, that I had told too much

.

, that I had put too much of myself into it.

Then it was that I resolved never to allow the picture to be exhibited. [...]'

(in Holland, 2003: 88-89)

(*Dorian Gray*: 110-111)



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